

3 Spine-tingling Tales for Young Readers

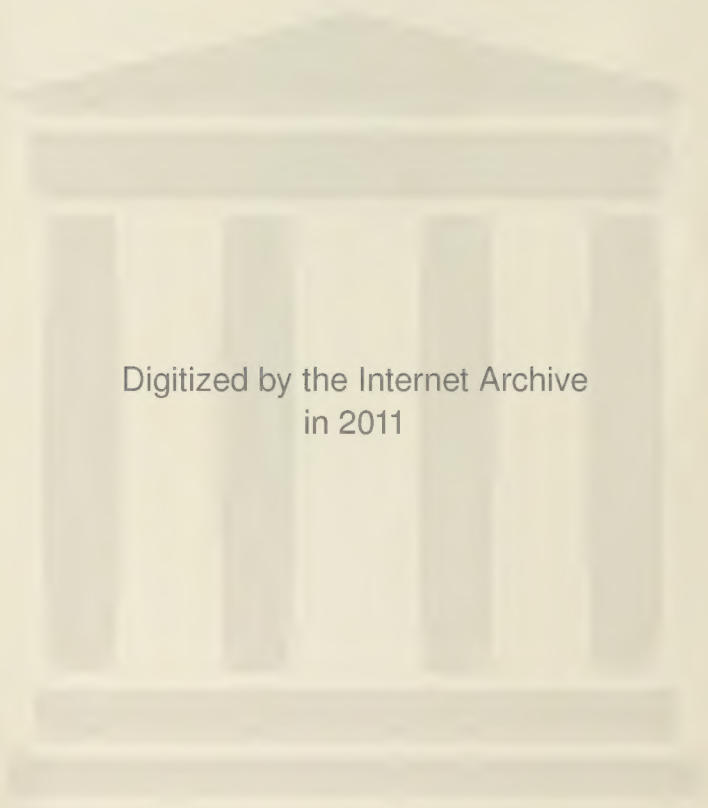
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FRIGHT TIME

- OUT OF THE DARK
- IT HUNTS BY NIGHT
- KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

#9





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FRIGHT TIME

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OUT OF THE DARK

by Elaine Kule

1

Fire was streaming from its nostrils. I'm not kidding. And smoke was pouring out of its ears. It was the scariest thing I've ever seen. In real life, anyway. Hey, I gotta get home. I'll call you. Bye, later."

I laughed. That was Derek, my best friend, telling me about some dragon he and his family saw at Funland. You may have heard of the place. It's a super-colossal theme park that just opened about 50 miles from our town. It has everything—rides, exhibits, shops, even a hotel that has a huge slide right in the pool.

FRIGHT TIME

Derek and I have been buds forever, so I know he exaggerates a little. Actually, I don't mind, because his version of things can be pretty funny. Like this "dragon" looking so scary? I don't think so.

I guess I should introduce myself. I'm Jonathan Ellis. I live in kind of a boring town, on an average street, in a plain old regular house. Not by myself, of course. There's Mom, Dad, my nice but basically boring nine-year-old sister Nell and my baby brother Willy. I better stop calling him that—a baby. He hates it, and he is six already. But since I'm twice his age, I practically feel like his uncle or something.

As I was saying, nothing very exciting happens around here. For a memorable adventure, you have to leave town, like Derek and his family. And even a fake dragon sounded a lot more thrilling than what I'd been doing all summer: mowing lawns and pulling weeds by day, baby-sitting at night, all for just a little spending money.

If you ask me, considering the time and labor I put in, I should have made a fortune.

Anyway, the summer was almost over, and all I had to show for it was a small pile of cash

OUT OF THE DARK

(that'll go like *that*), grass-stained jeans and the gloomy thought that another year of homework, tests and endless reading was approaching.

But then Dad, good old Dad, burst into the house and announced, "Pack your bags, everyone. We're going to Funland!"

I couldn't believe it. What perfect timing! I had never been more ready for a vacation in my life. I danced around with Willy, who looked as thrilled as I was. Actually, I had him to thank, because he'd been begging our parents to take us since school had ended.

I must have broken the all-time record for packing a duffle bag. After running around my room like a maniac, pulling out clothes and stuff from my dresser and closet, I'd say I was down in Dad's car in twenty minutes, easy. Not for long, though. Mom asked me to help Willy with his stuff. I think the kid figured we were moving there permanently or something. Little brother was trying to squeeze everything he owned in his little suitcase. Even shy Nell was prancing about while getting ready for takeoff. I guess we all needed this break.

I quickly called Derek just as everyone was heading outside. He rattled off some last-minute

FRIGHT TIME

advice: "No matter what, start with the Tunnel of Terror. It'll take the rest of your vacation to calm down." Yeah, right. I had to hang up when Willy started tugging at my leg. Then I locked the door and followed him into the car. We were on our way!

Despite my excitement, I slept for most of the trip. That just shows you how exhausted I was. But when I opened my eyes, I spotted the sign that had been advertised like crazy: WELCOME TO FUNLAND. Willy clapped, Mom clapped, then Nell and I joined in. Dad chipped in with a hearty "Yay."

After a stop to register at the hotel, we unpacked our bags and went outside. I tried to steer Mom and Dad in the direction of this Tunnel of Terror. Although I knew the place was just a goofy way to scare kids, Derek had me curious. But my parents wanted to tour the grounds—Funland has these trolley cars that take you around—and besides they reminded me, "We all have to stay together, especially on the first day." That made sense, and in the spirit of cooperation, I went along for the ride.

Yet later, when we were dropped off near the Tunnel, no one would go in with me. My parents

OUT OF THE DARK

didn't think it was "time well spent" and were convinced the place would give Willy nightmares for life. As for afraid-of-her-own-shadow Nell, forget it.

But my legs sort of shifted me into the line of people waiting to get in. And within seconds, I was moving along behind another family heading for the entrance.

My heart was pounding. I'd never done anything this gutsy before. As I shuffled along a dark corridor, I thought about turning back. But then what? Return home, where nothing exciting ever happens, and miss my chance to see Funland's main scare attraction? Sometimes a kid's got to do what a kid's got to do, I told myself, even if it means suffering the consequences.

They had these sort of large, slow-moving bumper cars that followed a set path along the clammy, dim tunnel. I scrambled into one, afraid an attendant, dressed in a werewolf costume, might stop me because I was a kid, alone. Maybe the mask affected the person's vision, because I rode off, no problem.

My eyes adjusted to the phony torch-lighting pretty quickly. There were cobwebs, shadowy figures and a soundtrack of eerie noises. A skeleton

FRIGHT TIME

popped out of nowhere. I giggled out of nervousness, a habit I hope to grow out of soon.

Then I saw Derek's fire-breathing dragon. I knew he'd made too big a deal out of it. The thing looked totally fake. All it did was move its head a quarter of an inch, back and forth. "What a rip," I said a bit too loudly.

The woman in front of me turned around and frowned, just like Mom would have done if she were there. I leaned back, enjoying my freedom, waving to the mechanical witches and ghosts floating among a few toy bats. Then something, or someone, grabbed me by the elbows. Suddenly, I was lifted out of the car and was flying through space, away from the bumper car path and down to a dark, deserted cavern.

Where was I going?

And why?

2

The first thing I did was laugh. (I really need to work on that.) But I was sure this must be part of an act, some extra thing they threw in, maybe for kids riding alone. Pretty inventive. I mean, until

OUT OF THE DARK

now, this Tunnel of Terror was nothing special. Yet I had to admit that the black-coated creature standing in front of me, with its bony hands and hollow eyes, was pretty believable.

Maybe too believable. Although it's rude to stare, I couldn't help it. Because as far as I could tell, this witch-goblin-whatever was headless. No amount of makeup or costuming could look so real so up close. My heart started racing so fast I thought it would burst.

"I'm out of here," I said. "Get me into the next empty car—now." Brave words, though my shaking voice was a dead giveaway. But, short of screaming—very uncool and a definite last resort—I had to do something. There sure wasn't anyone else in this dark little corner to help me.

Then I heard a mumbled whisper. Twice. It came from the creature. I didn't dare lean any closer, so I just went for a nervous "What?" The words were clearer the third time. Good, I thought. It understands English.

But what I heard made absolutely no sense. "Find the dragon," the creature said.

Huh? "What are you talking about?" I almost shouted. "It's down there. That green animal with fire pouring from its nose. You can't miss

FRIGHT TIME

it." Then I stopped. This "thing" I was talking to had no mouth.

"Find the dragon—or else!" With that threat echoing in my ears, I was pushed down a long, winding chute. I didn't know where I was headed, but as long as it was away from that creepy creature, it had to be in the right direction.

I quickly saw light, thank goodness, warm, bright, welcome sunlight. And just a few yards away was my wonderful, terrific family. Talk about a sight for sore eyes. It felt like I hadn't seen them in twenty years.

"Jonathan! There you are! Don't wander off like that. You scared us," Dad said.

Tell me about it, I thought.

Mom looked at me. "Do you feel okay? You're as pale as a ghost."

An unfortunate choice of words, Mom. I stood still as she felt my forehead. I've noticed that mothers enjoy doing that. It must be in some sort of book hospitals give to new moms before sending them home with their kids: "Whenever your child looks even slightly strange, feel his or her forehead before panicking."

Anyway, I was still pretty upset. Either something very weird happened in that tunnel, or

OUT OF THE DARK

Derek, more courageous than I ever imagined, downplayed the attraction. Thought #1 was more likely.

Thought #3 was to avoid any more trouble for the rest of the trip. I've heard that too much stress can make hair turn gray. I don't know if it's true for kids my age, but why take a chance?

So, with playing-it-safe my goal, I told Mom and Dad that I was going back to the hotel to watch TV. That really surprised them. I mean, vegging in front of the tube was practically the only fun thing I'd done all summer, and I had complained about it plenty.

I was just as surprised when they let me go. Then again, it was almost time to change for dinner, and the hotel was just a short distance away. After Dad gave me a key, I waved good-bye. As soon as they walked off, I dashed to our room, locked the door, and pushed a chair against it for good measure.

I had to hand it to Dad—we really had a nice-sized room. I pulled off my sneakers, propped some pillows against the headboard of this huge bed, and flicked on the TV with a remote control. A sitcom was on, an episode I'd seen ten times. Fine with me. Right now I just wanted familiar.

FRIGHT TIME

Familiar was good. I'd definitely had enough of the totally bizarre and strange for one day.

During some stupid commercial, I heard a knock on the door. It couldn't be my family because Dad had a key. I was sorry I hadn't put out the "Do Not Disturb" sign.

"Who is it?" I called out.

"Housekeeping," said a soft, woman's voice. "Do you need more towels?"

With the five of us in one room, it sounded like a good idea. I moved the chair, unlocked the door, and opened it just enough to take a pile from a smiling chambermaid. When I went into the bathroom to put the towels away, there was another knock.

Probably housekeeping again, I thought. Derek had said they put chocolates in the room at night. I opened the door and came face-to-face with the black-covered creature.

It was the last thing I saw.



I can't tell you what happened next, because I must have blacked out. Luckily, I came to when

OUT OF THE DARK

I heard Dad's cheery voice in the hallway. I looked around the room for signs of something—a fight, a weird thing lurking about, a note that said, "Gotcha. Ha! Ha! From the funny folks at Funland." Nothing. There was nothing to show that creature'd been there.

Dad's key was already in the lock when I saw a piece of paper next to me. It was blank. I turned it over. There, in bright green, was a picture of a dragon. But not the cartoon figure I'd seen in the Tunnel of Terror. No, this drawing looked more serious, special even, like a painting of some kind. I shoved it into my shirt pocket just as the family walked in.

"Hey, Jon, feeling better?" Dad asked.

I must have mumbled something okay because he went on. "Good. You're going to love what we have planned."

"No, let me tell him. Let me." Yes, that was Willy. "After dinner, we're going on a hayride. All of us. Isn't that neat?"

I smiled at him, almost envying him. Lucky kid. Going on something like a hayride could make his day. But it did sound like a calm, What-can-go-wrong? activity. The creature had only come after me when I'd been alone. Being with

FRIGHT TIME

people, especially my own family, was suddenly super-important. For all I knew, it could mean whether I'd reach my next birthday or not.

Nothing like a steamy shower and great dinner to make you forget that your life is in danger. By the time Nell, Willy and I finished off our banana splits, we could barely move.

We all strolled over to Hayride Central and climbed aboard a large, comfy wagon. The temperature was just right for this sort of thing. The sun was setting. It was nice.

But although I appreciated the peace and quiet, after a few minutes my mind started to wander. I mean, close encounters with threatening, headless beings—twice in one afternoon—couldn't be Funland's idea of a good time. And I couldn't say anything to my parents, seeing that I disobeyed orders to begin with. Besides, I didn't have the heart to worry them. After all, it was their vacation too. And they'd maybe think I'm nuts and take us home.

As the wagon lurched along, I did come up with a couple of ideas. One was to wait outside the Tunnel of Terror's exit and ask kids my age if a black-hooded creature flew them to the top of the tunnel and insisted they find a dragon.

OUT OF THE DARK

Forget it. Even the question sounded weird.

But what about talking to a tour guide or information person? There were plenty of those around. I could just calmly ask, while looking as sane as possible, if they hired any performers to fly kids around and grip their arms so tightly they practically lost circulation. Yeah, right. They'd tell my parents I needed help. Psychological help.

Well, on the positive side, it had been nearly three hours since anything strange had happened. Maybe it was over. Maybe it was just one of those unexplainable things. We've all heard about things from another world—flying saucers and stuff like that.

Personally, I've never believed any of those claims or reports. In fact, I always thought that the people who made them were a little loony. But I knew what I felt, saw, and heard. I also knew that I was up against something I couldn't handle myself. But no one could help me. I went back to the idea about lying low for the rest of the trip.

"Boo!"

I jumped, but then I grinned at Willy, glad he snapped me back to the present. He started a

FRIGHT TIME

low-key tickle fight that lasted until we returned to Hayride Central.

"E-everybody off!" the driver sang out.

I was so busy looking at the starry night sky that I was the last one to jump down. I'd just hit earth when I heard a chilling voice say, "Find the dragon."

I froze, completely shocked. The driver had already moved on, but I knew the demand came from him. I noticed his gloves, and realized that he'd kept his back to us the whole time.

I had to do something. I mean, enough was enough already.

"What dragon?" I shouted, running after the departing cart. "What dragon?"

"Something wrong, Jon?" Dad asked, walking toward me. "Did you say something about a dragon?"

"No. No, I said '*wagon*.' I told the driver, 'What a wagon.'" I hated fibbing, but there was no other choice. As we walked back to the hotel, I thought, If they're trying to scare people around here, they're doing a terrific job.

Mom and Dad asked me to stay with the kids while they went out for coffee. Nell and Willy were watching TV. I looked at the brochure we

OUT OF THE DARK

had gotten in the lobby. It was shiny and colorful, with great pictures of Funland's rides, exhibits and attractions.

I flipped pages and spotted a place called The Family Tree. It seemed pretty interesting. Visitors could try tracing their family history by punching their last name into a computer. There was also a Funland attendant to help with more research through books and stuff. The article also said that some people's roots went as far back as the fourteenth century. Cool.

Toward the end of the page were examples of crests, or emblems, which wealthy families used to identify themselves. I looked at each one carefully. But it was the last picture that caught my breath. It was an exact duplicate of what was slipped under our door today, what I still had in my shirt pocket.

It was a dragon.

4

I must have slept well that night, because I woke up feeling terrific and all ready to go outside and enjoy a great day. My family and I all

FRIGHT TIME

ordered huge breakfasts and made our plans.

Nell asked me to go on the roller coaster with her, which surprised me. As I've already mentioned, my sister is not the bravest soul on the planet. And Funland's roller coaster advertises its "frightening twists and gravity-defying turns." That stuff doesn't bother me, though. In fact, I usually laugh all the way through. Anyway, Mom insisted we wait an hour.

After breakfast, we browsed through the souvenir shop. I stooped to return some coins a woman dropped from her purse, then headed for the T-shirts.

"You got one too, huh?"

I turned around. A guy about my age was pointing to the mysterious dragon picture from yesterday, which I'd put in my jeans pocket before leaving our room.

It took a few seconds for me to respond, that's how stunned I was. "You—you've been to the Tunnel of Terror?" I sputtered.

"Yeah—unfortunately." He looked like I must have—nervous, confused, afraid. Could I trust him? Yes. I had to. "I'm James Bennett," he said.

"Jonathan Ellis. I guess you've met those creeps in black-hooded robes."

OUT OF THE DARK

"I had the dubious pleasure." He sighed, as though some big weight was taken off him. "I'm glad we met. Honest, I thought I was going nuts."

"I hear you." Did I ever!

"Listen, why don't we go to whoever runs this place and complain about what's going on? Or at least ask for help. They can't think we're both crazy."

"Good idea. Did you go in alone too? To the Tunnel, I mean?"

"Yeah, I'm here with my grandparents, and they didn't want to. You know how it is. I had to check it out."

"Yup. Well, I've got some time before I have to head over to the roller coaster with my sister. Can you get away now?"

"Sure," said James. "But only for a half-hour. I'm playing miniature golf with my grandparents."

As soon as I cleared things with Mom and told Nell I'd meet her at Funland's Funride, James and I took off. We asked a park attendant (they're all over the place) for directions to the Administration Building. On the way there, James and I made a few not-very-funny jokes,

FRIGHT TIME

like if anything happened to us, our families could sue and win a fortune.

"But seriously, why, out of all the kids here, are we being threatened?" James asked. "What's so different about us?"

"Well, getting us alone could have something to do with it. I mean, most of the kids here are surrounded by their families. I guess my mother's right when she says there's safety in numbers. Also, we're about the same size and age. That could be something."

"Sure, like we're old enough to go find the dragon, but young enough to still be scared."

"Right," I said. At least things were starting to make a little sense. "It really does help to talk about this. Look, that must be the building right there." I pointed.

Straight ahead was a small white house with a sign that read "ADMINISTRATION." I suddenly felt a little nervous. So was James, I could tell. We climbed a short flight of stairs and opened a screen door. It set off a little tune which would get on my nerves plenty if I had to hear it every day.

"Hello!" I called out. "Is anybody here?"

A short woman with red hair (it was orange

OUT OF THE DARK

really, I can't understand why people call it red) stepped out from what I guessed was a back room. She was holding a coffee mug and smiled brightly.

"Why, hello. How are you this morning? Have you lost your way?" Her voice was so chirpy I relaxed. Nothing frightening about her.

"No, not exactly." I cleared my throat. Where should I begin? "You see, my friend and I—" I whirled around, full circle. There was no friend. James had vanished.

5

My heart sank. Where was he? I know I didn't hear him leave the building. There wasn't the least sound or squeak of a door closing.

I turned again to the woman. She was still smiling, but with a genuinely puzzled expression on her face. "Did you see another kid in here?" I asked. "Just now?"

"No, I'm afraid I didn't."

I'm afraid too, I thought. I ran out of there, searching wildly for James, shouting his name. People were staring but I didn't care. How could

FRIGHT TIME

someone disappear like that? This was all too much.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost time to meet Nell. I remembered James saying that he was playing miniature golf with his grandparents, but that was in the opposite direction. Well, if he'd just decided to leave without saying anything, I guess I'd find out soon enough.

I started walking and trying to figure out what happened. It really bugged me. James didn't seem like the sort of person who'd just sneak off. And why would he do that to begin with? He was as upset as I was. Yet, on the other hand, I barely knew him. I decided to forget about everything for awhile and try to enjoy the roller coaster ride with Nell. I spotted her waiting with my family by the entrance gate and jogged over to them.

"You sure you're up for this, Nell? Don't be embarrassed to back out." She doesn't like it when I do the big brother thing, but what if she had a fit or something when we're going 90 miles an hour, 20 feet off the ground?

"Let's go, superhero. I've been waiting here for ten minutes already. And, in case you've forgotten, this was my idea in the first place."

OUT OF THE DARK

True enough. We waved good-bye to our parents and Willy and clambered into the last available seat. We strapped ourselves in and, seconds later, started to move.

Boy, was this thing fast. It instantly went from zero to 60 miles per hour. And then speeded up after that. We went sideways, upside down, slowly climbed up a mountainous peak, then slid down a 90-foot, totally vertical drop. Kids were screaming and crying. I, of course, was laughing my head off.

Just as the cars entered a completely dark archway, I heard an eardrum-piercing shriek from the seat next to me. I turned to Nell, but it wasn't my kid sister sitting there.

It was the black-coated creature.

The next scream was mine, just as we re-entered full-light and the most level, non-scary part of the ride.

"Take it easy, Jon. You're embarrassing me."

I slowly turned my head and saw Nell. I felt more relieved than foolish.

"For goodness sake, get a grip," she said.

"Get a grip is right," I muttered under my breath. I was really losing it.

The ride finally came to a halt. Frankly, I

FRIGHT TIME

couldn't scramble out of that car soon enough.

Willy ran up to me. "Was that you yelling? Was that you? It sounded like you."

I could feel Nell looking at me. Here was her chance to throw me off the pedestal Willy had me on. Well, go ahead, I thought. I knew that my behavior was justified. I'm only human, which was more than I can say for the ghoul haunting me.

"No, that wasn't Jonathan. It must have been some other kid," Nell said.

I glanced at my sister, who tried to conceal a smirk with her hand. I saw I wasn't the only one fibbing on this trip, but I was glad. Willy would have told the entire world that I was a wimp.

To restore my good standing even more, I offered to take Willy on the Ferris wheel, which was nearby. He was thrilled. My parents appreciated it, too. Will can get anyone exhausted. They took Nell on a pony ride.

I was up for this—a nice, relaxing ride with my cute little brother. I lifted him onto a seat, then hopped in and snapped the safety bar shut. I told Willy to hold on to it tightly and gave him a hug and sat down next to him.

As we started to rise, I leaned my head back and looked at the sky. Not a cloud in it. I

OUT OF THE DARK

breathed deeply, closed my eyes and smiled. This beat mowing lawns any day.

We had reached the wheel's peak for the second time when the machine suddenly stopped. There was complete silence for a moment, mostly from shock, I think. This sort of thing hardly ever happens.

Then some of the passengers started to chatter nervously. I looked at Willy's unhappy face and told him this was part of the ride. Chalk up another necessary fib. Then came the expected: crying from the younger riders. By the time Willy joined in, I was a wreck.

I gazed at the sky again, this time with frustration. What awful thing would happen next? Then I saw it. Faintly—I mean, you really had to look—was the word, BEWARE in the bright blue sky, like it was written out of clouds.

This really got me steamed. If someone wants to mess with me, that's one thing. I can take it. I may faint or sweat buckets, but I can take it. Frightening a bunch of little kids, however—especially my baby brother—was really low. I knew it now.

This was war.

Luckily, the wheel started up again. Willy still

FRIGHT TIME

looked a little shaken, though. To cheer him up, I suggested we ask Mom and Dad if we could take a swim before lunch. He brightened immediately, which is one of the things I love about my little brother. He's just not the gloom-and-doom type.

Mom and Dad had seen our near-calamity. They hugged us and kissed us as soon as we landed. A swim? No problem. It just shows you. Timing is everything. I think I could have asked for a new bike at that moment and gotten it.

We raced to the hotel lobby, letting Willy charge ahead. But as I passed the reception desk, I stopped, remembering the missing James. I approached a tall, slim man.

"Um, excuse me. Sir?"

"Yes? What can I do for you?" He smiled. They all smile around here, I thought. Is everyone in on what's going on, or do they not have a clue?

"I'm looking for a boy around my age and height. His name is James Bennett. Do you know him, or could you tell me what room he's in?"

The man was looking behind me. "He and his grandparents just stepped off the elevator."

I spun around. There, on the other side of the room, was the same guy I met earlier, the one I

OUT OF THE DARK

walked with and spoke to. "Thanks," I said to the man. Then I headed toward James.

"Hey, guy, I looked all over for you. What happened?"

He stared at me with a cold, blank expression. "Who are you?" he asked. "I don't know you."



I stood there and gaped, feeling hurt and confused. Why was he doing this?

"Why are you doing this?" I almost shouted. "What's going on, James?"

He just raised his eyebrows and shook his head at the elderly couple with him, as if to say, "This kid is bonkers."

"Come on, Grandma and Grandpa, let's get some lunch. I'm starving."

My heart sank. I had lost an ally in the battle against unknown demons. And someone I thought might be a friend. Sure, he was almost a stranger, but sometimes you get a sense about a person, you know? James really seemed like a nice guy. Nothing weird about him at all. It just shows you.

FRIGHT TIME

I walked to the elevator and pushed the button. When the doors opened, I stepped inside. Just as the doors were about to shut, a hand came between them—a bony, clawlike hand. I'd know it anywhere.

Terrified, I pressed the CLOSE button on the elevator panel with my palm, hit the EMERGENCY knob with my elbow and screamed bloody murder. It worked. The hand disappeared, the elevator began its slow climb, and I was safe. Whew.

I was just about to step onto our floor when I noticed a small, black piece of—I stopped down to get it—fabric. Some material must have ripped from the coatsleeve as the creature pulled away. Yes! Evidence! Proof that I wasn't imagining things! I pocketed the cloth and practically skipped down the hallway.

By the time I reached our room, everyone was in bathing suits. "I'll wait for you, son," Dad said. "Mom can take Nell and Will." Good old Dad. He didn't even scold me for what probably seemed to him like dawdling.

"No, that's okay." To be honest, I packed in such a hurry that I couldn't remember if I'd even brought a suit. A snorkle, goggle and fins, sure, but I was a little fuzzy about the suit. Dad may

OUT OF THE DARK

be glad I'm alive, but my occasional carelessness has, I know, brought him close to killing me. "You go ahead. I'll meet you guys at the pool."

"Okay. See you in a little bit."

I scrounged around my drawer, searching for trunks. There they were, thank goodness. I grabbed them and was about to bolt from the room. Then I remembered my swimming gear. It was getting to be quite a load. I stuffed everything into a bag, closed the door and sprinted down the corridor.

I took the stairs. It would be faster, I told myself. But when I reached the lower level, I couldn't find a sign to the pool. The nearest door stayed locked, despite my tugging.

Fast footsteps were heading toward me from the floor above. I held my breath. Then I spotted the red and white uniform of a Funland attendant and sighed with relief.

"Hi," I said. "How do you get to the pool from here?"

"Follow me." She didn't slow down. It was work keeping up with her. "I'm Sue, by the way. If you have any other questions, just ask."

"Thanks. I'm Jonathan. Jonathan Ellis. I'm here with my family. Well, not now, of course.

FRIGHT TIME

They're at the pool. That's why I'm going there. To meet them. Boy, this place is big." That's another thing I do when I'm nervous—talk a lot. Why was I nervous? Maybe because we were going way beyond ground level. I wanted the pool, not the boiler room.

At the risk of sounding ungrateful, I decided to speak up. "Uh, Sue, are you sure we're going the right way?"

She threw her head back and laughed, though I didn't see what was so funny. "Sure, I'm sure. This is a shortcut. We just go down this passageway and through that tunnel. Don't worry, I haven't lost a kid yet. But there's always a first time."

She laughed again, this one more of a cackle. She stopped suddenly, pulled at her face, and spun around.

I gasped. Staring at me was the scariest-looking creature I'd ever seen.



"What happened? Wh-where's Sue?"

The witch standing in front of me held up an

OUT OF THE DARK

amazingly lifelike mask with a wig attached. "So Sue me." Her pun was followed by an eerie chuckle that echoed throughout the empty passageway. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. I love modern-day humor."

I wasn't sure what that meant. Anyway, I think it's stupid to laugh at your own jokes. But, more important, I knew that I had to outsmart this nut whoever or whatever she was.

Although battling a witch was serious business, there was something pretty funny about a witch in a Funland uniform. She was such a ridiculous sight that I felt a giggle working its way up my throat. I tried to squelch it, but "Sue" caught on. With a short wave of her bony arms, she changed into a black pointy cap and flowing gown. More appropriate, though even more frightening.

I took off as if my life depended on it. It did. I could have made better time if my bag of swimming stuff hadn't slowed me down. But "Sue," who looked centuries older without her makeup and wig, was really quick on her feet. With her gnarled hands—claws, really—she grabbed my arms. I put up a decent struggle, though. And as long as I had her attention, I figured I should try

FRIGHT TIME

to get some answers.

"Why are you and the others after me? I'm just an ordinary kid. I can't do anything for you. Why don't you leave me alone?"

I was sorry I asked. In a screechy voice, my enemy said, "It's the dragon. We must have the dragon."

I stopped fighting her off. "Time-out, 'Sue,' or whatever your name is. I don't have a dragon, I don't know anyone who has a dragon. And in case you haven't heard, dragons don't exist. But if by some chance they did, and if by an even greater chance I had one, I'd gladly hand it over to stop this craziness." I took a deep breath, surprised that "Sue" was still listening. "Look, does it have to be a dragon? Would a lizard do instead? How about a salamander? I bet I could get you a ton of assorted reptiles. So what do you say? Can we work something out?"

"Kids," the creature muttered. "They're so . . . childish." Then she shouted, "The crest, you fool. Do I have to draw you a picture?"

Ah-ha. That rang a bell. Now we were getting somewhere. "This crest. Is it at The Family Tree?"

"Bingo."

OUT OF THE DARK

"And with all your powers, I have to get it? Why?"

The voice dropped a to low, threatening level. "You don't have to know. Just know this—that if you *don't* help us, great harm will come to you and your family."

That did it. "Hey, look over there!" I pointed to a spot behind "her."

The creep spun around. "Where?"

Worked just like in the movies. I swung my leg back, and with a really nice kick—a skill I developed from soccer practice—I managed to knock "Sue" down.

"Owww. Why, you little . . ."

I didn't stick around to hear the rest. I ran off—in all directions at first. I decided to go back up the stairway. While racing as fast as I could, I glanced over my shoulder. No one, or nothing, was following me. I didn't even see the witch.

I climbed the stairs two at a time, found an unlocked door, and dashed into the lobby. A jolly tour guide walked toward me and said, "Hi, how're you doing?" I pushed him out of the way.

I found the double doors leading to the pool and swung them open. After scanning the area, I spotted my family and ran to them, panting for

FRIGHT TIME

breath.

"Ah, good. I was just about to call the room," Mom said. She removed her sunglasses and peered at my arm. She noticed the two long scratch marks. No blood or anything, but they were ugly. Mom looked at me, concerned. "What happened?"

No more fibs, I decided. "I had a run-in with this really awful creature. But don't worry, I'll clean my arm in the washroom. Hey, anyone want to join me for a swim in about four minutes?"

"I do. I do," Willy sang out.

I smiled at him and thought, No one's going to hurt you, little guy. "You got it, champ. Be back in a flash."

The humongous pool was a blast—clear, deep, with sunlight bouncing off the water. And the huge, winding slide was major. Willy and I clung to each other, laughing as we wailed down and splashed into the pool.

After the sun dried us off a bit, we strolled to the cafeteria for lunch. Nell, who stood on the long line in front of me, turned around and whispered, "You look awful."

"Excuse me?" What's this? Grief from my kid

OUT OF THE DARK

sister now? Besides, compared to the creatures I'd been seeing lately, I was beginning to feel downright handsome.

"I didn't mean it like that. I've just never seen you looking so tense. As if you've got five tests and forgot to study for all of them. Honestly, here we are, at the best place in the universe, and you act like you've got more problems than the President of the United States or something."

Considering what I'd been through, I thought I was taking things pretty much in stride. I'd bet plenty of kids would be basket cases by now.

Nell was still facing me, her arms folded. She obviously wanted some sort of explanation.

What to do? I wanted to protect Nell by not telling her anything. But that could be a mistake. Maybe she should be aware—be very aware—in case . . . I didn't even want to think about it.

I decided to take the plunge. After all, Nell was pretty grown-up for her age. Besides, I remembered from my brief friendship with James how good it felt to talk to someone about this weird, won't-go-away craziness. Also, I could trust Nell. She wouldn't desert me, or be my friend one minute and act like she never met me

FRIGHT TIME

an hour later.

As the line started to move, I quietly clued Nell in. While we filled our trays and walked to an empty table, Nell's eyes nearly popped after learning about the close calls I had. But she didn't doubt a word of my story.

When I was finally through she said, "Look, I understand about not telling Mom and Dad. But you've got to find out who's in charge around here and report what happened. I'll go with you if you want."

I shook my head. "I just know they'd think I was bananas. And by the time I convinced them to believe me, it might be too late. These creatures are capable of anything. That's why I'm so disappointed about James. He could have backed me up." I spotted our parents and Willy and waved them over. "Here they come, so listen up. Let's ask Mom and Dad to take us to The Family Tree after lunch. I want to—Hi, everyone." I switched gears really fast. "Hey, the food here is pretty good."

We all got down to the business of eating. Then, while munching on fruit, Nell casually asked Mom and Dad if they had plans for the afternoon.

OUT OF THE DARK

"I thought we'd walk around some more, see the exhibits," Dad said. "Is there anything special you kids want to do?"

"How about The Family Tree?" I asked. "I read about it in Funland's brochure." I described the place a little.

"Sounds interesting," Mom said.

"Yeah," said Nell with a straight face.

Willy wasn't so sure, but when I told him we might see pictures of dragons, he was all for it.

"Well, that settles it then," Dad said. "We go to the room, change, and head for The Family Tree."

We stood up and brought our trays to a conveyor belt. I was following my family out of the cafeteria when this little kid came up and handed me a scrap of paper.

"Here," he said. "Someone told me to give you this."

You can't blame me for being suspicious. "Who?" I demanded.

"I don't know. Some kid your age. He paid me a dollar. You don't have to get all huffy about it. Gee." He gave me a look and walked away. Fast.

I opened the folded paper and read the clear handwriting. It said, "Sorry about before. I can

FRIGHT TIME

explain. Please meet me at Funland Lake in one hour. James."



I folded the paper and slowly put it in my shirt pocket, trying to understand this latest development. The note had me puzzled. I mean, James didn't seem like a nutcase when I first met him. But he sure wound up behaving strangely. If the guy had a reason for acting the way he did, I wanted to hear it.

I caught up with my family. And, after changing our clothes and asking directions, we found The Family Tree. There wasn't much of a line, thank goodness. I didn't think I could stand it if there were. I mean, for all I knew, this visit could mean the difference between life or death.

The place was incredible. There was a tree in the center that was so enormous, Willy didn't believe it was real. He ran up and touched it, then reported back—awestruck—that it was.

Different countries had their own booths, with a Funland attendant, dressed in the country's costume, at each one. Flags decorated the

OUT OF THE DARK

front of each exhibit, and there was plenty of stuff for sale—national emblems, books, cassettes. There was also a small theater that showed a movie for younger kids about America being a melting pot.

Mom and Dad took Willy to see the film, which freed up Nell and me to scout the place by ourselves. Perfect. Our first stop was The Computer Line, which was really great. You just follow a list of directions and—presto!—the machine prints out all kinds of info. There's also a Funland employee standing by to help with additional research.

Our name—Ellis—is British, which Dad had already told us, but we wanted to read what the computer had to say. The Funland guide said the Great Britain booth had terrific stuff, so we wandered over there.

As we approached the area, I saw something that made me stop. I poked Nell so hard she yelped. "Look," I said, nodding. There was a large flag with a dragon on it.

Her eyes widened, appreciating the find. "I think we're on the right track. Come on, let's check this out."

We practically tumbled into the booth, falling

FRIGHT TIME

over each other to reach the Funland guy. "That flag," I sputtered. "Can you tell us about it?"

"Yes, certainly," he said. "That's the flag of Wales, a country on the west coast of Great Britain."

Nell was staring at a display case with rows of what seemed like crests. "Can you tell us about those?" she asked, pointing.

"Of course. Come over here for a better view."

We followed him and listened as he explained that a crest was used by people to identify themselves, particularly during medieval times. A design was chosen and put on armor, doorposts and stuff.

This was all very interesting, but I couldn't forget my mission. And I also didn't see a dragon among the displayed items. "Um, do you have a crest with a dragon on it?"

"Yes, but that one is quite special and is stored in our safe."

"Why?" Nell asked.

"Because it's real and therefore quite valuable," the man replied. "We've already had one break-in attempt and believe the culprit was after that piece. These others, after all, are just copies, although they're accurate."

OUT OF THE DARK

"How did Funland get the genuine crest?" I asked.

"An historian lent it to us. I'm told the crest will be displayed at key places throughout the country."

Nell looked deep in thought. "Who gave the dragon crest to the historian?"

"My understanding is that he found it at a campsite," the man answered.

"A real crest was just lying around on public grounds?" That was me talking.

"Well, legend has it that the piece was stolen from a family. A family suspected of having supernatural powers."

"You mean like witches and things?" That was Nell.

"I suppose. You know, in some cultures, these talents, shall we say, were highly respected. In others, people were punished, imprisoned, or even put to death if it were so much as whispered that they possessed magical abilities."

"May we see it?" I asked as politely as I could. "The dragon crest, I mean. Just for a second?"

"Well, I suppose it would be all right. You seem like nice children. I must say, it does my heart good to meet youngsters so eager to learn."

FRIGHT TIME

Nell gave me an excited thumbs-up as the man stooped behind a display counter. He fiddled with a knob, and seconds later, a small door popped open. Then he removed a cloth bag and placed it on the counter. Next, he took out a tissue-wrapped package, carefully unfolded the soft paper, and there it was—the same crest I'd spotted in the brochure. Viewing it up close was totally different, though. It looked real, and real old, and just perfectly made.

"People always want to know how much this is worth," the man said softly. "They can't seem to understand that it's priceless."

Nell and I looked at each other. I knew we were thinking the same thing, that our lives were priceless too, yet they had been seriously threatened. And for what? A lost heirloom? Give us a break.

We also realized, without needing to say it out loud, that we couldn't do anything. The crest had to stay where it was. Even though we may have had a good reason for breaking the law, safe-cracking and breaking into exhibition halls after hours was definitely beyond our capability.

The Funland fellow was rewrapping the crest when Mom, Dad and Willy walked in.

OUT OF THE DARK

"Hey, how're you guys doing?" said Dad. Good old Dad. I'd do anything for him.

"Fine," Nell and I answered.

"Do you see anything you'd like as a souvenir?" Mom asked.

Yeah, I thought. Unfortunately, I'm a little short of cash. But, as I looked at my mother—the best in the world, if you ask me—I wanted desperately to do something. Something that might satisfy those witchy, ghoulish creatures.

I had an idea. Nothing great, but better than nothing. I turned to the attendant and asked, "By any chance, do you sell miniature versions of the dragon crest?"

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact. We just received a shipment this morning. I didn't even have a chance to unpack it."

My parents agreed to the purchase, though of course they didn't quite see the attraction. I couldn't blame them. The souvenir crest was made of cheap plastic. Still, it was my only hope. I clutched the paper bag as if it held the real thing.

While we walked around the large hall, I remembered the note I'd received from James. I told Nell about it and showed her the paper.

FRIGHT TIME

"What do you think?" I asked. "Should I go?"

"Only if I go with you. If he's up to anything weird, may he won't try it with your younger sister around."

Bringing Nell along when I met a guy my age would seem like I was afraid of him. And if anything happened to her, I'd never forgive myself.

"No, you stay with the family. But you'll know where I'll be. If I'm not back in a half-hour, call Funland Security or something."

"Okay. But be careful."

I promised I would. As it happened, Willy was worn out—his eyes were closing, he was so tired. Our parents asked if one of us would mind watching him while he napped and they went for a stroll. Nell quickly volunteered, saying she was reading a book she wanted to finish and this would be a good chance—which left me free to meet James at Funland Lake.

I followed the signs that led me down to what was really a small pond. There were some ducks floating around, and a curved wooden bridge with railings. I also saw two paddle boats that had awnings over them. One was parked near the bridge. A hand—a normal-looking hand—stuck out of it and waved.

OUT OF THE DARK

"Psst! Jonathan! Over here!" That sounded like James.

I walked to the center of the bridge, leaned over the railing, and peered inside. Yup, that was James all right.

He gave me a thin, uneasy smile. "Thanks for coming. I wouldn't have blamed you if you didn't." He gulped and looked around nervously. "I don't have much time."

The suspense was getting to me. "What's going on? First you disappear without saying anything. Then you pretend you never even met me."

"They saw me with you," James said quickly. "As we were entering the administration building. One of them put a hand over my mouth so I couldn't scream. Another grabbed my legs and pulled me away, off to the side where there's hardly any traffic. They warned me not to make trouble, and that if they caught me talking to you again, terrible things would happen to me and my family. I got scared and ran. I felt so badly when I saw you in the lobby, but I didn't know what else to do. I was afraid. I still am."

A voice, sounding so evil it gave me the chills, said, "And well you should be, my boy. And well

FRIGHT TIME

you should be."

The voice came from the other paddle boat. It had crept over toward the bridge, without us even realizing it. The passenger, of course, was one of "them."



"Run, Jonathan! Run!" James cried out, as the creature tried to pull him into the other boat.

But I couldn't. Especially when I had my peace offering, or whatever you want to call it. "Yo, excuse me, could you just stop what you're doing for a minute? I have something you might like," I called out. I raised the bag and jiggled it.

The black-coated being stopped and looked at me. So far, so good. I smiled. "As you may already know, the actual dragon crest is not for sale. It's also under tight security." I took a deep breath. I had to really sell this for all of us, James included. "But I brought you the next best thing." I removed the small crest from the bag and held it up. I also stole a quick glance at James, who looked terrified but hopeful.

"Throw it over here," the creature demanded.

OUT OF THE DARK

With a shaky hand, I did as I was told. The hooded being used its clawlike fingers to grasp the crest and examine it closely. "Inferior junk," it hissed, throwing the piece in the water. "You have twenty-four hours to deliver the real crest," it warned me. Then it screeched at James and grabbed him by the collar. "And you, young man, have disobeyed orders. For that you must be punished."

I jumped over the railing to help my friend. It seemed like he was one, now. I also thought we could take this jerk. After all, two against one is usually a winning combination.

Except when one player has supernatural powers. I was about to punch the bully, but it was already carrying James away—to one of its creepy caves, no doubt. As they flew low overhead, I called out, "Don't worry, James. I'll get that crest somehow. Hang in there."

I dragged through the water and climbed over the railing. Then I heard a kid say, "Look, Mom. Over there. A witch is flying a boy over Funland."

The mother, shielding her eyes, said, "Well, what they won't do to entertain you kids," she chuckled. I nearly screamed in frustration.

FRIGHT TIME

I walked back to the hotel in dripping wet clothes. Fortunately, Mom and Dad were still out by the time I got to our room. Not only didn't I want to answer questions about my latest adventure, but I desperately needed to speak with Nell.

"What happened?" she whispered, not wanting to wake Willy. She glanced over my wet clothes. "Are you okay?" She wanted to know everything, so I told her. "Wow," she said when I finished. "What do we do now?"

"We aren't doing anything. I, however, have to go for it."

"You mean break in and steal the crest?" she asked.

"I prefer the word 'borrow'," I reminded her.

"That's even harder. You'll have to break in twice. Forget it."

"I have to try. Tonight. After all, we go home tomorrow." With any luck, I thought.

"Well, I'm going with you, whether you like it or not."

"No way, Nelly. I can't allow that. It's too dangerous."

"Tough. I'm going. Besides, who knows? I might be helpful."

OUT OF THE DARK

Of all the weird things that had happened, it was still the change in Nell that amazed me most of all. Somehow my sister had gone from a shy, timid person to someone brave and outspoken. I'd always loved the quiet, boring Nell, but I really admired this new version of my sweet little sister.

Before we made any plans, I wanted to leave a message for James's grandparents so they wouldn't worry about him, at least not too much.

Would they believe that a horrible flying creature had kidnapped their grandson? Coming from me, it wasn't likely. After all, James had acted as if I was bonkers this morning. And as long as this crest-crazy bunch thought that their prize might still be coming, I felt pretty sure that they wouldn't harm the guy.

So, the way I figured, why worry them? Why not just say that James took a last-minute ride with friends? It was stretching the truth again, but again, I thought it was necessary. I spoke with the hotel operator, who promised to notify Mr. and Mrs. Bennett.

Mom and Dad returned, Willy awoke, and we all got ready for dinner. During a fantastic meal, we talked about the evening's plans. Mom and

FRIGHT TIME

Dad were taking Willy on the merry-go-round. I guess they figured he deserved it, after the Ferris wheel fright. Nell and I said we just wanted to walk around, since it was our last night at Funland. We went our separate ways outside the restaurant, after Nell and I promised to return to the room by nine o'clock.

That didn't leave us a whole lot of time, especially since we had zilch experience with breaking into buildings and stealing—I mean borrowing—things without asking. We needed some sort of game plan, though. The Family Tree was just a few yards away when suddenly Nell stopped walking.

"I've got it!" she said. "First we need to find a security guard. Then watch me work."

"Huh?" was my intelligent reply. "Isn't the whole idea to avoid running into those guys?"

"Have faith, big brother." She waved at a passing Funland cop. "Officer, could you help us, please?"

"Why, sure. What seems to be the problem?" The tall, heavy man approached us with a friendly smile.

"Well, we were at the Great Britain exhibit this afternoon and unfortunately, our father lost

OUT OF THE DARK

his contact lens there. We looked everywhere for it, until we had to leave. My brother and I offered to come back this evening, but now we see that the place is closed. Will you let us in? Please? We're leaving Funland tomorrow."

I didn't dare look at Nell through all of this. I was afraid I'd do something to ruin what I though was a brilliant and imaginative tale. Who could turn down a request like that?

"Well, don't you worry," the officer said while removing a set of keys. He opened the exhibition hall. "I'll be glad to help you kids. In fact, I'll even help you find that runaway lens."

"Oh, we can't ask you to do that," Nell said smoothly. "I'm sure there are other people who need you more than we do. We wouldn't want you to get in trouble or anything." She smiled up at the man, who was opening up the Great Britain booth. "Thank you so much, officer. We're very grateful."

"Yeah," I managed, still pretty stunned by my sister's performance. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. I'll be standing outside if you need me. You're right, little lady. I *am* supposed to be on patrol."

"Okay. Thanks again." Nell turned, flicked on

FRIGHT TIME

the light switch, closed the door and grinned at me.

"Wow! I said. "That was really something. I don't know if I can ever believe you again or not."

"This is no time for compliments. The hardest part is still ahead of us."

"You're right. The combination to the safe. I was hoping it might be written down in a drawer or something."

"Not after a break-in. They might want a code that changes every day but is easy to remember. You know, like the date."

"Makes sense," I said. "Let's give today's a try."

I bent down behind the display counter and twisted the dial to 0-8-20. The door opened! My delighted sister clapped, but only with fingertips, to keep the noise down.

"Nell, you're a genius," I said while I was removing the cloth bag. I checked to make sure the dragon crest was still in there and tucked the package in the waistband of my pants. Nell turned off the light, closed the door and walked to the hall's entrance.

"Okay," she called out to the guard. "You can lock up now."

OUT OF THE DARK

"Well, that didn't take very long. Found it, did you?"

"Yes. Bye."

We hustled out of there as fast as we could without looking suspicious. "You know, I'm glad we got this thing, but I feel badly about that officer," Nell said. "Here he was, just being nice and helpful, and a valuable item gets stolen. I hope he doesn't get in trouble."

"I hope we don't get in trouble. Don't forget, that man can describe us. Or identify us. The crest has to be returned before any of that happens. But first we have to help James."

Nell looked at her watch. "We're okay with time. Where're we going next?"

"To the Tunnel of Terror. I'm pretty sure that's where they're keeping him."

We ran there.



Nell told the Tunnel's gatekeeper that we got separated from our family, who was already inside. Thanks to her storytelling ability, we had no trouble getting in.

FRIGHT TIME

"Well, this is where it all began," I said to my sister. "Brace yourself."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," she said as we hopped into a motorcar. But her knuckles were white as she gripped the guardrail.

As the vehicle lurched forward, it suddenly took a sharp turn. It separated from the other cars. Within seconds we were in a cavernlike room, facing a circle of the black-coated, hooded beings who had been terrorizing James and me. The only light came from the fire burning beneath a large kettle in the middle of the room. And, in a corner, I saw my friend, looking upset but unharmed.

Finally one of them—I guess the leader—spoke. Unlike the others I'd heard, this creature had a deep, clear voice. "You have the crest, I hope. For your sakes."

"Yeah, we have it," I said. "But you're not getting it until we hear why you want it so badly. You ruined our vacation and made us go to a lot of trouble to get this thing. You owe us an explanation."

"An explanation? Very well," the creature agreed. "Centuries ago, we were tormented by people in our village. They even stole our fam-

OUT OF THE DARK

ily crest. Why? Because they thought we practiced witchcraft. They were correct, of course. Still, we were given a trial, if you could call it that. An extremely unfair judge condemned us to death. Fortunately, our powers helped us to escape.

"We vowed to get back at the man who wanted us destroyed, but he died shortly after our 'trial.'" The creature laughed bitterly. "We held a meeting and decided upon a different punishment, to capture the judge's favorite relative and force him to give us our family crest in return."

"The dragon," I said.

"Yes, the dragon."

"Look," I said. "I'm not related to this judge. I'm sure James isn't either."

A black-inked drawing floated toward us. Nell picked it up, glanced at it, and then looked at me. She seemed astounded. I took it from her and was equally shocked. The boy in the picture looked incredibly like me.

"Amazing resemblance, don't you think? He was the judge's nephew," the leader said. "You could very well be his descendant. As for your friend over here, he was merely a decoy—a way

FRIGHT TIME

to get you to, shall we say, cooperate. A rather complicated scheme that worked out nicely, don't you think?"

"Is that all you do?" I asked. "Sit here and think up your weird schemes?" I lifted my shirt and removed the crest. "Here's your precious dragon," I said, still holding it. "James, come on. We're getting out of here."

James stood up a little shakily and walked toward Nell and me.

"Not so fast," the leader said.

"You're right," I shot back. "Very fast." I grabbed Nell's hand, pulled James's arm, and shouted "Run!"

"After them!" I heard the leader yell. A flapping of long coats told me the chase was on.

An empty motorcar rode by, and the three of us frantically jumped in. Then we saw the most astonishing sight. Funland's own mechanical creatures—the witches, ghosts, goblins and ghouls—were crashing into our enemies.

They were all there—the animated figures who had been standing outside some attractions, the creatures from inside the Tunnel of Terror (the regular ones, not the spooks we were running from now), the robots from some

OUT OF THE DARK

of the exhibitions, everything in Funland in fact that wasn't supposed to move was doing just that.

They moved fast, for things that didn't have knees, lumbering along, striking out with their metal arms or bony hands or grasping claws, whatever they had. The phantom types shrieked and wailed, the mechanical ones clanked and groaned, like their machinery hadn't been oiled in years. But they didn't stop coming, thrashing out at all of the black coats, wherever they were.

I don't know who was more scared, those creatures who were so frightening themselves, or the three of us, huddled in the car and watching the whole thing. How and why had the Funland creatures come loose? Why were they on the attack? Was it accidental or deliberate?

We'll never know. But their attack was enough to crumble the ancient bodies and turn them into dust.

As we approached the Tunnel's exit, a strong wind blew the swirling dust particles away. Leaving the place, I could have sworn I heard a chorus of distant wails. But when we saw the last of the creatures crumble and their dust blow

FRIGHT TIME

away into nothing, I grabbed the steering wheel as hard as I could and drove us back to the hotel—and safety.

11

After breakfast the next morning, we packed and checked out of the hotel. I saw James in the lobby. He waved and walked over.

"Thanks again, guy. I don't know what I would have done without you," he told me.

"No problem," I said. We slapped five. "Weird, though, wasn't it?"

James grinned. "I'll say. No one would believe it."

"Well, just tell any doubters to call me."

"Hey, let's exchange addresses and phone numbers. You know, to keep in touch."

"Great!" I said. We hunted for paper and pencils.

"By the way," James said. "Whatever happened to that crest?"

"Nell and I returned it before breakfast," I said as we both began writing.

OUT OF THE DARK

"How'd you manage that?"

"We just left it on the display counter when the attendant wasn't looking. It was the coward's way out, but we were afraid to tell the Funland person the truth. What could we say—that we stole the crest because a kid's life was at stake? And then there was the security guard. He could have gotten in trouble for letting us in there unsupervised."

Mr. and Mrs. Bennett walked over to us. "All ready, James?" his grandmother asked, smiling at me.

"Sure thing, Grandma." He punched my shoulder playfully. "Well, so long, buddy."

I tapped him back. "See you around, kid. Have a safe trip home."

"Thanks. You too." I hope it's the beginning of a long friendship. He really is a nice guy.

My family and I took one last look at Funland before driving home. It's a wonderful place, but I probably would have enjoyed more if all that craziness didn't happen.

Yet it was quite an adventure. Plus, I learned a few things and made a new friend. That's what

FRIGHT TIME

I like about traveling and seeing new places. But this trip also made me appreciate my family more. And home. If you ever hear me say, "Nothing very exciting ever happens around here," bop me one.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

by Paul Buchanan



It was dark in those woods. I don't mean dark like in your bedroom at night. This was the darkest place I've ever been, and to tell you the truth I was pretty scared. We felt our way through the woods with our arms stretched in front of us so the branches wouldn't hit us in our faces. We kept tripping over rocks and tree roots. Worst of all, we kept hearing things moving around in the dark.

"Relax, Ryan," my cousin Kevin kept telling me. "It's probably just a rabbit or something. It's probably as scared of you as you are of it."

FRIGHT TIME

Wanna bet? I thought. Of course I didn't say that out loud. Instead I just said, "Let's get out of here."

My cousin Kevin and I had left our family campground the day before yesterday—in the morning. We were just going to see what was on the other side of a creek and come right back. Kevin is fifteen. My parents thought he's old enough to look out for me. That's why they let us go hiking on our own. Anyway, we got lost somehow.

We hiked all day trying to get back to camp. When it got dark, we crawled under some trees and took turns sleeping. The next day we tried to hike back the way we came, but nothing looked familiar. Now we were in the middle of these woods, and it was dark. Dark.

Kevin had a flashlight and a map in his backpack, but we'd used the flashlight so much the night before, it was almost dead. We only switched it on when we really needed it.

Kevin turned it on now and held it in his mouth, trying to read the map. He was also trying hard not to act scared, but I knew he was. And he was getting frustrated too. "Okay, according to the map the green areas are wooded,

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

so we have to be in one of the green areas." I looked over his shoulder at the map. There was so much green on it, it looked like a golf course.

"That doesn't help us much," I said.

"At least I'm trying to get us out of these woods!" Kevin shouted. The flashlight fell from his mouth onto the pine needles at his feet. "I'm not just saying, 'Let's get out of here,' over and over again."

He bent down to pick up the flashlight. "*You* figure out where we are if you think you can do better," he said. As he stood up, the beam of light poked through the closest trees and lit up a pair of red eyes.

"What was that?" I yelled.

I startled Kevin and he dropped the flashlight again. "What? What?" he shouted, grabbing for the flashlight.

"Over there," I said, pointing. "There's something over there. It's watching us."

Kevin pointed the flashlight beam to where I had seen the eyes. There was nothing but bushes and dark branches. The light began to go dim.

"I don't see anything," Kevin said, shaking the flashlight as though that would help it get brighter.

FRIGHT TIME

"Something was there," I said. "I promise."

"Probably a rabbit," Kevin said, though his voice was shaking.

I shook my head. "Kevin, the thing was *huge*. If it was a rabbit it's some kind of world record bunny."

There was a rustling in the bushes behind us and we both jumped. Kevin spun around and shone the flashlight where the noise had come from, but its light was getting too dim. It only lit up the tree trunks closest to us. Kevin moved the light around in a slow circle. We saw something race through the trees in back of us again.

Whatever it was, it was big. And fast. Real fast. Kevin tried to follow it with the flashlight, but he couldn't keep up with it. He kept turning in circles. We strained our eyes trying to see into the darkness.

Nothing.

"Let's get out of here," I said again.

A twig cracked to our left and we both jumped. Kevin stabbed the light at it. Nothing. It was like the animal was circling us, waiting for an opportunity to attack. My heart was thumping so loud I could hear it. In a few more minutes the flashlight would be completely

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

dead.

Kevin and I stood back-to-back so that nothing could sneak up behind us. We just kept turning in circles, pressed together, trying to see what was out there.

"You still think it's a rabbit?" I said.

"It's no rabbit," he said. "I don't know what it is, but it's big!"

Just then I heard a loud snarl in front of me, and something rushed at me from the shadows. It grabbed the cuff of my jeans, and my foot was yanked out from under me. I went down on my back. It scurried up my chest like it was going for my throat.

I grabbed a handful of fur and tried to pull the thing off me. It felt like tiny hands were grabbing my clothes. Two hands seemed to grip the cuffs of my jeans while a third pulled at my shirt. I thrashed around on the ground, trying to pull the thing off me. Whatever it was, it was strong and vicious. The flashlight kept shining in my eyes as I writhed around on the ground.

"Do something!" I screamed. "Do something!" I heard Kevin unzip his backpack, but mostly I heard growling and snarling. It didn't sound like any animal I'd ever heard. It sounded more like

FRIGHT TIME

a person pretending to be an animal. I could feel its hot breath on my neck. I grabbed an ear and pulled it as hard as I could. The thing howled in pain. I felt my shirt begin to tear.

Suddenly there was a flame. Kevin had rolled up the map and set fire to the end of it with a match. He waved the flame over me. I heard a mad snarl, and the animal let go its grip on my clothes. It paused a moment, growling and clawing at the flame, and then it bounded off my chest. I scrambled to my feet and saw a large shape disappear into the dark woods.

"What was *that*?" I asked breathlessly.

"A raccoon," Kevin said.

"A *raccoon*? No way!" I said. "Raccoons don't get *that* big."

"I'm telling you it was a raccoon," Kevin said, waving the burning map in front of us. "But it wasn't like any raccoon I've ever seen. It was like its eyes were glowing. And one of its paws was missing. That was one scary animal. You should have seen it."

"Believe me," I said, "it was scary enough from my position."

The map was about half burned now.

"This thing isn't going to last much longer,"

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

Kevin said, picking up his backpack. "Let's really get out of here!"

2

Kevin started moving through the trees away from where the raccoon had run, holding the flaming map in front of him. I couldn't have been closer to him if I was riding piggyback. We had turned around so much I had no idea in which direction we were headed. When the map started burning his fingers, he dropped it on the ground and stomped on it. He turned on the flashlight and shone it around. It glowed for a few seconds and then died.

I looked around trying to make out the forms of the trees, and then in front of us, through the top branches, I could see stars. I walked a few yards. I couldn't believe it. We were on the edge of a huge meadow. There were millions of stars in the sky. I'd never been so excited to see them. We got clear of the woods and looked around. It was hard to tell how big the meadow was, but what a relief to be out of the woods!

"What's that?" Kevin asked. I looked where he

FRIGHT TIME

pointed. There was a dark shape farther out in the meadow. It looked like a huge boulder.

"It's a rock or something," I said. "Maybe we can climb up on it and take turns sleeping. It won't be comfortable, but at least it'll be pretty safe."

Kevin thought that was a pretty good idea. We started walking out into the meadow. As we got closer the shape began to look like a big box, and then we realized that it was a cabin.

"Cool," Kevin said. "We can use their phone and get someone to tell our folks we're okay."

"And maybe get some food," I added. We started walking faster.

It was a one-story cabin with a big front porch. There were no lights on. I wondered if it was empty or if maybe who ever lived there was already asleep. It could have been four in the morning for all I knew.

When we got to the front, Kevin knocked on the door. When no one answered he looked at me. I shrugged. Kevin banged harder. We waited a minute and nothing happened. I pressed my ear to the door. I didn't hear anything inside.

Kevin turned the handle. The door creaked open.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"Anyone home?" Kevin called. I followed him into the cabin. He lit the flashlight. In the dim light we could see a little living room and kitchen and a doorway in the back. Kevin walked through and knocked on the back door. "Hello?" he called. No one answered. He opened the door and pointed the flashlight into a back room.

"Nobody's home," Kevin said. "But there's a big sofa in here. What do you say we get some sleep?"

I felt uneasy about making myself at home in an empty cabin, but I was ready to drop. Who knew? Maybe no one lived here. Maybe it was just a weekend cabin or something.

Kevin curled up at one end of the sofa with his head resting on one of the arms. I took the opposite end. There was plenty of room. It felt good to be indoors. I started to relax.

"That was some raccoon," I said. "You sure it wasn't a brown bear with a mask?"

Kevin laughed. We were both starting to unwind, lying there in the dark. "Maybe it was that Tasmanian devil guy from the cartoons," he said.

"Maybe it was Bigfoot," I laughed.

We talked a while and laughed a lot before we fell asleep.

FRIGHT TIME

When I woke up, sunlight was coming through the back window. I looked around. The cabin was a mess. There was a lot of dirt streaked on the floor and the walls were scratched up. Everything looked used and worn out.

I heard a noise in the front room. I tiptoed to the door and peeked out. A tall thin man was building a fire in the front fireplace. His hair was white. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and as he stacked the wood in the fireplace, I could see the muscles and veins in his arms moving under the skin.

"Sir?" I said.

He straightened up and looked at me. He didn't seem surprised to see me there.

"Now that you're awake, it's time for you to leave," he said. He turned around and began to work on the fire again.

"We don't know where we are, sir," I told him. "We got lost a couple of days ago, and we've been wandering around since then. If you let us use your phone, we can get someone to come pick us up."

He finished with the fire and straightened up to look at me. "Don't have a phone," he said. "Where are you supposed to be?"

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"We were camped out at the Crestline Campsite. Maybe you can help us get back there."

"That campsite is twenty miles from here."

"If you drive us there, I'm sure my dad will pay you."

"Don't have a car," he said.

"Is there a town near here?" I asked.

"The closest town is back at your campsite. You should have stayed there."

He seemed cold and mean. I thought maybe he was mad at us for coming into his cabin.

"We were really tired last night, and this big weird raccoon attacked me," I said, trying to explain why we'd made ourselves at home. "Your door was open, and we didn't—"

He cut me off. "Look, kid," he said. "It sounds like I'm stuck with you for a couple of days. Don't expect me to be happy about it. If I wanted company, I sure wouldn't be living out here, would I? There's a supply truck that'll be here in three days. You can hitch a ride on that. Until then stay out of my way, and stay out of my business."

He pulled some matches from his pocket and lit the fire. I just watched him, trying to think of something to say.

"I suppose you guys will want some food," he

FRIGHT TIME

said once the fire was lit. "Go wake up Kevin and tell him to come eat."

I headed to the back room, and then it struck me: I couldn't remember ever telling him Kevin's name.

3

He gave us some stale bread and baked beans—not much of a breakfast, but it sure tasted good after two days with nothing but the lunches we'd brought in Kevin's backpack. Kevin and I ate at the kitchen table, but the old man ate in front of the fireplace, staring into the flames.

Kevin watched him a while and then whispered, "What's up with him?"

I shrugged.

"Kind of creepy, isn't he?" Kevin asked.

I was about to tell Kevin about how the old man knew his name without my telling him, but I decided not to. I must have let our names slip without realizing it. There was no other explanation.

When we finished eating, Kevin and I went

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

outside so we could talk. We also wanted to get out of the old man's way for a while. Kevin had his backpack slung over one shoulder. We crossed the porch and started walking across the meadow.

"That old guy's some kind of weird hermit," Kevin said when we were clear of the cabin. "You think he's maybe an escaped criminal?"

"I don't know. I don't think even a fugitive would want to live way out here."

In a few minutes we were in the center of the meadow.

"Let's not go too far," I told him. "We've already got lost once this week."

"How about the guy's cabin?" Kevin went on. "Didn't it seem odd to you?"

"Like how?"

"Well, he didn't have a bed in there for one thing," Kevin said. "Who ever heard of a house without a bed in it?"

"There's no law that says you have to have a bed," I told him. "Maybe he sleeps on the sofa. It was big enough."

"It's just weird, that's all. The place gives me the creeps," Kevin said. "Hey, I thought the old guy said he didn't have any neighbors."

FRIGHT TIME

I looked over to where Kevin was looking. There was another cabin near the edge of the woods. At least it looked like a cabin, but it was a lot smaller than the old man's—it was more of a shack really. We headed toward it.

"Maybe that's where he keeps his bed," I said.

When we got closer I could see that it didn't have any windows. There was no chimney either. We walked around it, checking it out. It was about the size of a two-car garage. It was built out of logs. There was a door on one end. Kevin went up and knocked. The door swung slowly open.

"Anyone home?" Kevin called. When there was no answer, he pushed on the door and stuck his head inside.

"What's in there?" I asked.

"Nothing," Kevin said. "It's just an empty room."

I tried to peer over Kevin's shoulder. He walked into the shed, so I followed him. It was black inside, but there were some cracks around the ceiling where the light got in. You could see all this dust moving around in the rays of sunlight. It had a dirt floor. It smelled like the inside of our doghouse back home.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"What do you think this place is for?" Kevin asked, running his hand along the rough wall.

"Maybe it was some kind of toolshed or stable or something," I guessed.

"Maybe it's the old man's dungeon, where he locks up nosy kids."

Kevin reached around and pulled his flashlight out of his backpack. He banged it a couple of times on the palm of his hand and turned it on. He held it close to the wall. In the dim light, I could see deep lines cut into the logs about as high as my chest. He moved the light down the wall. The wood was scraped and splintered all over.

"It looks like someone was keeping a wild animal in here," Kevin said.

I ran my finger along one of the deep lines. They were claw marks. "Yeah," I said. "And the animal wasn't too happy about it."

I heard the wind blow around the roof, and the door began to close.

"Grab it, Ryan!" Kevin shouted. "It might have some kind of lock. We don't want to get stuck in here!"

I dove for the door and pushed it open before it could shut. In the daylight I checked the door.

FRIGHT TIME

"It does have a lock," I said. "But it locks on the inside." Kevin came over and looked at it. It was a big combination lock hanging on a rusty chain inside the door. He looked at the outside of the door. There was no way to lock it from out there. He pulled the door almost shut and shone the light on the lock.

"Now, why would you have the lock *inside* if you want to keep an animal in a shed?"

I shrugged. "Beats me," I said. "This whole situation is just too weird. Why don't we go back outside?"

Kevin laughed. "Spooked, are you?" he said. He pushed the door all the way shut and turned off the flashlight. "How's this for scary?" he asked.

I couldn't see a thing except the light coming through the cracks in the roof. "Come on, Kevin," I said. "Open the door. This isn't funny."

"Shhhhhh," Kevin teased. "What's that noise out there?"

"Cut it out, Kevin. Open the door."

Kevin laughed in the darkness. I couldn't see him at all. "Why, I think there's some weird creature creeping up on this shack," he said. "It's not going to be happy to find us in here."

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"Kevin, come on," I pleaded. "Knock it off. Open up."

"I think it's reaching out its claws to open the door right now," he said. "Are you ready to be eaten?"

"Kevin, don't be such a little—"

The door was suddenly wrenched out of Kevin's hand. It swung open and blinding light flooded in. I yelled. Kevin knocked me down as he tried to get away from the door. He fell on top of me, and we scrambled across the dirt floor to the back of the shed.

"What's going on in here?" a voice snarled. There was a dark figure in the doorway. It was the old man. "I told you two to mind your own business!" he shouted. "If you know what's good for you you'll never go near this shed again!" He stepped back and the sunlight hit him. His face was red and twisted with rage. The veins in his neck were sticking out. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists. "From now on, you stay in the cabin." He stretched his long arm out and pointed with a bony finger.

My heart was pounding. I realized that Kevin was sitting on my leg. His backpack was poking me in the neck.

FRIGHT TIME

"Get off me, you big oaf," I told him.

"Out!" the old man shouted in a voice that was like an explosion. We jumped to our feet and raced out the door and past him. We ran all the way back to the cabin.

4

The rest of the day we huddled in the back room of the cabin. Every once in a while I'd peek out the door and see the old man rummaging around or staring out the window. It was like he was waiting for something.

By the late afternoon Kevin and I were getting hungry. We hadn't eaten since early that morning.

"You ask him," I said.

"No, you ask him."

"Come on, Kevin. I'm hungry. And you're older. You ask."

"No way, Ryan," Kevin said. "He likes you more. He told me that. He thinks you've got nice manners."

"Yeah, right," I said. "I don't think that guy ever liked anyone."

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"Let's play 'odd or even' to see who goes."

That sounded fair to me, but I ended up losing. "Well, it was a pleasure knowing you, Ryan," Kevin said, patting me on the back. "Is there a message you'd like me to give your folks if I ever see them again?"

"Very funny," I said, peeking out through the door. The old man sat at the table staring into a mug of coffee.

I slipped through the door and walked slowly to the table. The old man didn't look up. I wondered if he knew I was there, or if he was just ignoring me. I cleared my throat. He looked up suddenly. It was like he had forgotten we were in his cabin.

"Oh," he said angrily. "*You*."

"Mister," I said. "We're both kind of hungry, and we were wondering if we could—"

He held up his hand to silence me. He looked worn out and tired. I hadn't seen him up close in the bright light before. There were dark lines under his eyes, and his eyes were bloodshot.

"See what's in the cupboard," he said. "The pots and pans are under the sink. Just make it quick."

I walked over to the cupboard. I felt uneasy

FRIGHT TIME

having my back turned to him, but he seemed too tired to do anything, even if he wanted to. There was nothing in the cupboard but cans—soup, beans, chili,—just lots and lots of cans. I got down a large can of chili.

“Is this okay?” I held the can up. The old man scowled at me and then nodded.

As I stirred the chili on the stove I kept eating big spoonfuls. Kevin was too chicken to ask for the food, so I figured he could wait. As the chili cooked, I watched the old man. He just sat there staring into space—like he was day-dreaming, but with a sad look on his face.

“What should we call you?” I asked him.

He glared at me. “I’m not looking for any friends,” he said coldly.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just trying to be nice. We want to get out of here just as much as you want us to leave.”

The old man sighed and looked back into his coffee mug. “They used to call me Slim,” he said. “But nobody’s called me that for a long, long time. When you live like I do you don’t have much use for a name.”

“So how come you live way out here?”

He looked at me, and I could see he was angry.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

He stood up slowly. I grabbed hold of the handle of the pan I was cooking the chili in, just in case I needed to defend myself.

"I *have* to live out here," he said. "And the less you know about it, the better off you'll be. Now just stay out of my way."

He stood up and went to a chair across the room by the fireplace. I let out the breath I'd been holding. I grabbed a spoon for Kevin and took the pan of chili into the back room.

We scarfed down the chili. It was like we were racing to see who could eat the most before it ran out. When the chili was gone, we sat against the back wall whispering. It was beginning to get dark.

"So what do you think he meant?" I asked. "Why does he *have* to live here?"

Kevin shrugged, "I don't know. You think he might really be some kind of escaped criminal hiding from the police?"

The thought gave me the creeps. "Or maybe he's that guy who hijacked a plane and then escaped by parachuting," I said.

"Maybe," Kevin said, and then he began to chuckle. "Maybe he's some kind of extraterrestrial who got left behind when his flying saucer

FRIGHT TIME

took off without him, and he's waiting out here for them to come back for him."

"Phone home," I croaked. "Phone home." We both laughed, but we tried to keep it down so Slim wouldn't hear.

"I've got it," I said, laughing. "He's this mad scientist, and he's out here doing secret experiments. He's trying to invent—"

"The wheel!" Kevin shouted. I started laughing. I couldn't help it. Then Kevin started laughing at how much I was laughing. Soon we were gasping for air and tears were running down our cheeks. Neither of us could catch our breath.

The door burst open suddenly and the knob banged against the wooden wall like a rifle shot. Kevin and I both jumped. We stopped laughing. Slim was standing in the doorway. "I'm glad you two are having so much fun," he growled. We stared at him, frozen by fear. "I have to leave," he said. "I'll be gone until morning."

Kevin and I glanced at each other. I was glad the old guy was leaving, but to tell you the truth I was nervous about being left alone.

"Come lock the door behind me," Slim ordered.

We followed him into the other room. I noticed

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

that he wasn't taking a jacket or lantern with him. He stepped outside and began to close the door, but then he stuck his head in again. "Whatever you do," he said, "don't open the door. No matter what you hear or see outside, stay in here with the door locked. Understand?"

Kevin and I nodded. But I didn't like the sound of it.

5

Once Slim was gone, it got dark pretty fast. We lit the lantern in the front room, found another in the back room and lit that one too. We wanted to make it as bright as possible. Neither of us went near the door or windows. We lit a fire and sat in front of it, trying to relax. Every once in a while the cabin would creak or groan, the way houses do at night, and we'd both jump. I noticed that Kevin didn't let go of the poker that he kept using on the fire.

"This is crazy," I said. "We go camping all the time. What do we have to be afraid of?"

Kevin nodded, still staring into the fire. "Not a worry in the world," he said in a small voice.

FRIGHT TIME

"Here we are, safe and snug in a cabin. We've got a nice fire going. We've got a lock on the door. What could possibly happen?"

Just then the fire cracked loudly and a cloud of sparks flew up the chimney. Kevin jumped to his feet, holding the poker in front of him like a sword, ready to defend himself. He was shaking all over. I laughed. Kevin was angry at first, but then he laughed too and sat down again.

"We're letting our imaginations run away with us," I said. "We've let a weird old man give us the willies. There's nothing outside the cabin to be afraid of."

Kevin nodded. "Just an old hermit," he said, with the light from the fire reflecting on his face. "He's harmless."

I knew we were both pretending we weren't terrified—when we both *knew* we were. I got kind of mad at myself. I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn't scared, so I stood up and stretched and went around the room looking at things, trying to act unafraid. "What do you think Slim does out there at night?" I asked.

"Maybe he howls at the moon," Kevin said. "Why don't you take a look out the window and see if you can see him?"

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

I looked over at Kevin. He was facing the fire, but he was sitting very still. He was waiting to see if I was brave enough to look out the window. It was like a dare.

"Maybe I will," I said, trying hard to sound brave.

I walked over to the window. It was high up on the wall, so I dragged a chair next to it and climbed up. It was so dark outside I could mainly see my own reflection in the window. I looked nervous, and another thing seemed odd. It was like my eyes were glowing red. I tilted my head to see better, but the eyes stayed in the same place.

It was something peering in the window at me!

I jumped back. I forgot I was standing on a chair. I fell down, and knocked over a bookcase and a small table. My back hit the floor. It knocked the wind out of me, but I knew I wasn't hurt. Kevin spun around, swinging the poker at the sound of the crash.

"What? What happened?" he yelled.

I couldn't talk. I was on my back, trying to breathe. I looked up at the window and saw a large antlered head turn and disappear. Kevin

FRIGHT TIME

was still screaming and waving the poker.

"A deer," I said, gasping. "It was just a deer. It was watching us from outside. It caught me by surprise, that's all."

Kevin helped me to my feet, and I dusted myself off. It took a minute for both of us to calm down, and once we did we started to laugh.

"That deer came this close to getting poked to death," Kevin said fencing with the poker. "He won't come back here if he knows what's good for him."

I looked up at the window. I stood under it and reached up. I could barely reach the dusty windowsill when I stood flat-footed.

"That must have been some big deer," I said. "That window has to be at least seven feet off the ground."

Kevin looked up at the window and frowned. "This must be the land of the giant animals," he said. "Remember our friend the killer raccoon?"

"The raccoon," I said. "Didn't you say it had eyes that glowed?"

"Yeah, and it was missing one of its front paws."

"Well, the deer out there had glowing eyes, too," I said. "They were like burning coals."

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"This is definitely weird," Kevin said with a shiver.



I put the table I'd knocked over back on its feet, and then set the bookcase back up. Books and magazines had spilled all over the floor. Kevin and I got down on our knees and started putting them back on the shelves.

"I hope these weren't in any special order," I said. "We'll be in big trouble if Slim thinks we've been going through his stuff."

I picked up an old photo album, and the pages all spilled out. I opened the empty album. It was a three-ring binder, and the rings had all popped opened. "Great," I said. "What a mess."

Kevin helped me gather up the pages of photos.

"Old Slim's some kind of hunter," Kevin said. "He would have loved your deer." Kevin handed me an album page. On it was a photo of Slim, a lot younger, kneeling beside a dead deer, holding an antler in one hand and a rifle in the other.

I turned over the page. There was another

FRIGHT TIME

photo of Slim, this time with a dead coyote. I flipped through the pages I was holding. There was a photo of Slim with some dead rabbits. There was another of him holding up a string of quail. The next one showed him kneeling by a dead mountain lion.

"See," Kevin said. "That's why the old guy lives out here. He's a hunter."

"If he's a hunter, how come there are no rifles in this place?" I asked him.

Kevin looked around. "I don't know. Maybe he keeps them somewhere else. I'll bet that's what he's doing right now. He's out 'coon hunting."

I shuffled through the pages of photos. I saw Slim as a teenager standing behind a dead black bear with a couple of other boys. I saw him holding up a dead bobcat by its front paws.

"Here, look," Kevin said, holding a black and white photo in front of my face. "See, he must be out 'coon hunting. You only go 'coon hunting after dark."

I took the photo from Kevin. It was black-and-white and very old. It showed a really young Slim holding a dead raccoon. I looked closely at the animal. I passed the photo back to Kevin. "What do you notice about the raccoon?" I said.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

Kevin studied the photo. "I don't know," he said. "It's just a raccoo—" He stopped in mid-sentence and caught his breath. He looked over at me and then back at the photo. "It's missing one of its front paws," he said quietly.

"Just like the raccoon that attacked me," I said.

"So what are you saying?" Kevin asked. "You think this raccoon came back to life or something? That's crazy. The raccoon we saw was a lot bigger than this one. And this photo must be fifty years old. It's just a coincidence."

"Probably," I said. "But there's something I didn't tell you about Slim. When we first got here he knew your name—even before I told him."

"What do you mean?"

"He said to me, 'Go wake up Kevin,' but I hadn't mentioned your name," I said. "He just knew it."

Kevin looked at me for a moment without speaking. "Naw," he said. "You must have told him. You just don't remember."

"I've been thinking about it for a long time," I said. "I didn't tell him. He had no way of knowing your name."

"Well then, how *did* he know it?"

FRIGHT TIME

I wasn't sure if I should tell Kevin what I was thinking. I knew he'd just make fun of me. "Don't laugh," I said. "This is just an idea. That raccoon that attacked me: what if *he* heard me say your name?"

Kevin stared at me without saying anything, and then he laughed. "I don't get it," he said. "Are you serious? You think the raccoon came running to tell Slim we were on our way over? And of course Slim speaks raccoon. Doctor Doolittle probably gave him lessons."

I thought I should probably stop right there. Kevin would make fun of me for the rest of my life if I told him what I was thinking. But no, I had to open my big mouth. "What if that raccoon was *Slim*?" I said.

Kevin just stared at me again. "The raccoon? Slim? Where are you getting this? You've got to stop reading those comic books."

"Just stop making fun of me and think a minute," I insisted. "Why does Slim leave the cabin at night?"

"I don't know!" Kevin shouted. "But it's *not* because he's some kind of werewolf. Or were-racoon in this case."

"Why doesn't he have a bed?" I argued. "If he's

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

a hunter, why doesn't he have any guns?"

"How should I know?" Kevin said. "Suppose you tell me."

"Okay, here's what I'm thinking," I said. "What if Slim killed all these animals, and then he got some kind of curse for doing it?"

"A curse?"

"Yeah," I said. "What if at night he turns into the animals he's killed? It's like their revenge on him."

"So Slim was the raccoon?" Kevin said. "And that was him with the antlers you saw through the window a minute ago? And tomorrow night he might be a squirrel?"

I knew it sounded stupid, but it made sense in a weird sort of way. "Well, yeah," I said. "I know it seems impossible. But I've got this creepy feeling. We know something's terribly wrong with Slim—I just think this might be what it is."

Kevin was speechless. He just kept staring at me and shaking his head. "This is stupid in about a million different ways," he said once he got his voice back.

Kevin went back to the fire and sat there stabbing at it with the poker. I finished putting

FRIGHT TIME

the photos in the album back in place. Then I sat down on one of the chairs behind him. Every once in a while Kevin would chuckle and shake his head. I felt really dumb.

7

I was still sitting in the chair when I woke up. I heard the lock turn on the front door. Kevin was in front of the fireplace, still asleep. The fire was just ashes now.

The door creaked open. Slim came in slowly. He looked exhausted. He said nothing, but he glanced over in the direction of the bookcase and the table I'd knocked down the night before. It was almost as if he was checking to see if we'd put everything back in place—as if he had *seen* me knock it down. I wished Kevin had been awake, but it would take more than just a look to convince him.

"How was your night?" I asked Slim, trying to be friendly. He grunted something I didn't catch and headed for the kitchen.

Slim spent most of the day on the front porch sleeping in a chair. Kevin and I could see him

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

from the front window tossing and turning and swatting at flies.

There was nothing to do in the cabin, so Kevin and I spent most of the day talking about the mess we were in. We were stuck there for a couple of more days at least, but I was beginning to wonder if we'd *ever* get back to our families alive. Every once in a while Kevin would make fun of me for what I had said about Slim's curse the night before.

"Look," I said, "if I'm wrong, *you* explain what he does out there all night."

"I don't know," Kevin said. "There are millions of things he could be doing. Maybe he likes astronomy. Maybe he's writing a book about owls. How should I know?"

Kevin was right. There *were* millions of things Slim could be doing. I felt pretty stupid.

A fly buzzed around my head and I shooed it away with my hand.

"Careful," Kevin said.

"Huh?"

"If you swat that fly, you might get the Fly-Swatter's Curse."

"Shut up," I said, but I laughed.

"Every night you'll turn into a flying insect

FRIGHT TIME

and you'll be chased by a giant bug zapper."

I laughed again. It was hard not to. It *was* a pretty silly idea.

"Leave me alone," I said. "Just leave me alone."

For lunch we ate a can of beef stew. We sat at the table eating it out of the pan with spoons.

"You know what we should do?" Kevin asked, waving his spoon in the air.

"What?"

"If we really want to see what he does, we should follow him."

"But we're not supposed to go outside," I said.

"We'll sneak out," Kevin said. "And we'll get back here before he comes back. He'll never know."

I didn't want to admit it, but the idea scared me. The last thing I wanted to do was leave the cabin at night.

"We don't even have a working flashlight," I said.

Kevin reached into his pocket and pulled out a candle stub and a box of safety matches. "We can use these," he said. "I found them when I was looking through the drawers for spoons."

"I don't know," I said. "We've already gotten

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

lost once."

"Come on," Kevin said. "We won't go in the woods. We'll stay in the meadow. There's no way we can get lost."

Slim woke up and came in for dinner about an hour before sunset. He didn't talk to us, and we tried to stay out of his way. After he ate he did a lot of pacing and grumbling, like he knew it was going to get dark soon, and he didn't want the night to come.

Just as the sun began to set Slim stepped out of the cabin.

"Stay inside!" he snapped as he pulled the door shut. "And no messing around."

As soon as the door clicked shut, we hurried over to the window and watched Slim hike across the meadow in the last few rays of light. When he was too far away to hear us, we opened the door and slipped out onto the front porch. We watched Slim from behind the porch railing.

Then we followed him from a distance, creeping low in the tall grass so that he wouldn't see us in case he looked back.

"It looks like he's headed for that old shed," I whispered to Kevin. Kevin nodded.

The shed was on the edge of the meadow. We

FRIGHT TIME

knew if Slim got to the woods we'd lose him—not that I wanted to follow him in there anyway. We ran through the meadow trying to catch up, ready to dive face first into the grass if Slim turned around.

When Slim got to the shed, he went around the far side to where the door was. Kevin and I stopped and knelt down in the grass. We couldn't see Slim now. He didn't pass by on the other side either.

"He must have gone inside," Kevin whispered. "Let's sneak up and see what he's doing."

My heart was thumping. "Yeah," I said. "Sure. Let's just be careful. Okay?"

It was getting hard to see in the gloom. The stars were coming out, but there was only a bit of a moon and it didn't give off much light. By the time we tiptoed up to the shed it was night.

We crept around behind the shed where Slim couldn't see us if he opened the door. We waited crouched in the grass.

"What do you think he's doing in there in the dark?" I whispered to Kevin.

Kevin chuckled. "Maybe he's developing pictures," he said.

I laughed quietly. "Or maybe he's playing with

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

his glow-in-the-dark decoder ring."

It was Kevin's turn to make a joke. "Maybe he's—"

Just then a loud snarl burst from the shed. Both of us jumped.

"What was that?" Kevin gasped.

There was a growl and then the sound of something smashing against the wall.

"The animal that lives there must have been inside. Slim must have wakened it up," Kevin said in a panic. "He's trapped in there with some kind of wild animal."

Before I could say anything, Kevin jumped to his feet and ran around the shed to the door. I ran after him. When I came around the corner, he was trying to yank the door open.

"What are you doing?" I yelled.

"We've got to get the old guy out of there," Kevin shouted, pulling at the door with all his strength. "He's going to get torn apart!"

"But what if—?" I started to say something, but I stopped. It was just too impossible.

Kevin ran over to the edge of the woods and came running back with a sturdy-looking tree branch.

"We've got to break the lock," he said. "What-

FRIGHT TIME

ever's in there is going to have the old guy for dinner."

"What are you going to do once you get the door open?" I yelled. I was scared. "There's something angry in there. You're going to get us all eaten!"

"I don't know, but we've got to try something. We can't just leave him in there!" He was right.

Kevin tried to jam the end of the tree branch into the crack in the door, but it was closed too tight. There was a loud scraping on the other side. We both jumped back. There were an eerie yowl and then the door shook in its frame, as though something had pounced on it from the inside.

"It wants out," Kevin said. "Maybe if we open the door it'll run outside, and we can go in for Slim."

Before I could answer, Kevin jammed the sharp end of the branch into the door near the top hinge. He pushed hard. There was a groaning sound and then the rusty hinge popped out of the door frame. The top corner of the door tilted out at us. Then something thumped against the door from the inside again. The door looked ready to burst out of its frame.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

Kevin went to work on the lower hinge. It was easier to wedge the branch between the door and frame now because the door was so loose. He pried at it and there was a popping noise as the hinge came loose.

The door sprang out of its frame. It hung only by the locked chain on the inside. We jumped back. The door blew open as though there had been an explosion inside. A huge mountain lion rushed out of the shed. It landed a few yards in front of us with a roar. Its tail snaked in the air, and it looked back at us with glowing red eyes. It hissed and pawed at the ground. It was so big it was glaring down at us. Its body seemed coiled up, ready to leap at us. I was the first in the shed, and Kevin pulled the door back into its frame. He pushed the door shut just as the mountain lion pounced.

The force of the lion against the door pushed Kevin to his knees. I could hear the claws outside digging deep into the wood of the door. I threw myself at the door. I put all my weight into pushing it all the way closed.

Then it was completely black. Kevin and I were both leaning against the door, holding it shut. I was so scared I couldn't move.

FRIGHT TIME

"The branch," Kevin grunted. "Can you reach the tree branch with your foot? We can wedge the door shut."

I was leaning with my back to the door, so it was easier for me to reach out with my foot. I stretched my leg out and felt around on the floor with my foot. I bumped the branch and then dragged it toward me with my toe. When it was close enough, I slid toward the floor with my back still pressed against the door. I picked up the branch and wedged one end under the door's crossbeam and dug the other end into the damp, bumpy ground.

We cautiously took our weight off the door. We heard the cat clawing and ramming the door, but the branch held it firmly in place. I heard Kevin sigh in the darkness. I couldn't see a thing.

There was a scraping sound in the dark and then a match flame sputtered in the air. I could see Kevin's face in the light. He held the match out toward me. "You okay?" he asked. I nodded and then the match went out.

In a few seconds, Kevin had another match burning, and then had a candle under it. The dim, flickering light filled the shed. Kevin's eyes grew large. "Where's Slim?" he asked.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

I looked around.

We were alone in the shed.



All night the mountain lion was circling the shed, trying to find a way in. A couple of times the door suddenly bounced and we stood stock still. We knew the lion was pouncing on the door, but the branch held it in place, and after a moment we could breathe again.

Sometimes we'd hear the lion clawing at the walls. Sometimes it would leap up on the roof and dust would rain down on our heads.

After the first hour the candle was gone, and the two of us huddled in the dark.

"It sure *looked* like Slim came in here," Kevin said, "but he must have just walked behind the cabin and into the woods."

"No," I said. "He came in here."

"Well, then where did he go? And don't even think of telling me that Slim turned into a mountain lion." The mountain lion squealed and leaped up on the roof again. I could hear his claws scraping on the planks above us.

FRIGHT TIME

"Why not?" I asked. "Slim killed a mountain lion. We saw a photo of it."

"Listen, Ryan. People just don't turn into animals."

"What makes you so sure?"

"They just *don't*," Kevin said. "You've been listening to too many stories."

"Well why *are* there so many stories about it—from all over the world—if it's never happened?"

"There are more stories about Santa Claus," Kevin said. "And he isn't real either."

When the first light of dawn began to shine through the crack around the battered door, the lion snorted and bounded off the roof. We sat listening for a long time, but that was the last we heard of it. The sun rose, and soon rays of light were coming in through the cracks in the roof.

Kevin went to the door and pulled up the branch we'd wedged against the door. The door toppled inward. Kevin held it in front of him like a shield while he peeked around the edge. Slowly he moved the door to one side and stuck his head out into the bright sunlight. The sky was real bright. We squinted and shielded our eyes. The lion was gone.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"Come on, Ryan," Kevin said. "We've got to get back to the cabin before Slim does, so he won't know we went outside. Run." Kevin broke into a sprint across the meadow.

He *already* knows we went outside, I thought. But I didn't say anything to Kevin. I just ran after him.

The cabin was just the way we'd left it the night before, and Slim wasn't there. We waited a couple of hours, and when Slim still didn't show up, Kevin fixed us something to eat. We were both hungry and exhausted.

After we ate we dozed around the cabin a while, and then Kevin began to get worried about Slim.

"What if the mountain lion we let loose caught up with him?" Kevin said. "I mean we were trying to save him by letting the mountain lion out, but what if we ended up killing the old guy?"

"Trust me," I said. "The mountain lion didn't eat Slim."

"We should go look for him," Kevin said. "What if he's hurt or something?" He walked over to the front window and looked out across the meadow. "But there's a mountain lion out there," Kevin remembered. "We could get hurt."

FRIGHT TIME

"There's no mountain lion anymore," I said.

Kevin ignored me. "That cat was running around all night," he said. "He's probably sound asleep somewhere. Come on, Ryan. We should really check to make sure the old guy's okay."

"Lead the way," I said. It was no use arguing.

It was close to noon when we started to search. We were still pretty jumpy from the night before, so we began by looking at the side of the meadow opposite the shed. By the time we got near the shed it was pretty late in the afternoon. Kevin was the first one to see him.

We were just walking along, and Kevin stopped dead in his tracks. He pointed ahead. A leg stuck out of a patch of tall grass. We ran to it. Slim was lying there, deathly still. He was covered with mud and bark and weeds.

"The mountain lion *did* get him," Kevin said. He dropped to his knees next to the old man.

"There's no blood anywhere," I pointed out. "He's still breathing." Slim was bruised and scraped all over, as if he'd been thrashing around on the ground or in the woods.

We shook him. He started mumbling things we couldn't make out. He didn't open his eyes. We got him on his feet and put his arms over our

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

shoulders. He staggered between us as we walked back to the cabin. He was still murmuring and coughing.

He was lighter than he looked, so we didn't have much trouble getting him into the back room and laying him down on the sofa. I put a rug over him and we tried to get him to drink some coffee, but it mostly dribbled down his chin.

We stayed in the back room with him for a while. He was sleeping and seemed to be comfortable, so Kevin and I went in the front room where we could talk without waking him.

"Okay, Kevin," I said when we were sitting at the kitchen table eating some beans, "if that mountain lion wasn't Slim, explain what happened. Did Slim just disappear?"

"I don't know," Kevin said. "Maybe Slim didn't go in the shed at all."

"You were there!" I shouted. "You *saw* him go in the shed!"

"Keep your voice down," Kevin said. We both looked at the door. We could hear Slim snoring. "I admit it," Kevin said softly. "It *looked* like he went in the cabin, but we were a long way off. He probably just went behind the cabin and into

FRIGHT TIME

the woods."

"Oh, come on, Kevin, we weren't that far off. You know what we saw."

"I also know that Slim didn't turn into a mountain lion."

"Well then, where did it come from?" I asked. "Explain the mountain lion."

"It was probably in the shed before we got there," Kevin said after a moment. "You saw all the claw marks on the wall—the mountain lion must be using the shed as his den. That's why Slim told us to stay away from it."

"Give it up, Kevin," I said. "That's not what happened last night and you know it."

"It *has* to be what happened, because what *you're* saying is impossible! And that's all there is to it."

I got up and went out the front door. I looked up at the clouds. A couple of hawks were circling high above. The tall grass looked beautiful in the sunlight with the breeze moving through it. The woods didn't look frightening in the light. Maybe Kevin was right. If darkness could make a place this beautiful so scary, maybe it was doing the same thing with my imagination.

I remembered how when I was a kid I'd get

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

frightened by the shadows on my curtains at night, even though I *knew* it was just an oak tree out there in the front yard. Darkness can make you think dumb things like that, I told myself. It can make you think a tree branch is a ghost, and it can make you think an old man is some kind of monster.

In a few minutes I was chuckling at myself for even having the idea that Slim was cursed. I decided not to bring up the subject again.



Late that afternoon we checked on Slim. He was snoring louder than ever. He'd been asleep nearly four hours.

"Man, that guy must be exhausted," Kevin said, shaking his head.

"You think he's okay?" I asked. "Should we do something?"

"I think he's just sleeping," Kevin said. "Besides, what could we do?"

Kevin was right. All we could do was let the old guy sleep. "I just hope he isn't sick," I said. "That's the last thing we need."

FRIGHT TIME

"How about we make something to eat for dinner, and then we wake him up and try to get him to eat?" Kevin suggested. "He probably hasn't eaten since last night. It might give him some strength."

It seemed like a good idea to me, so we looked through the cupboards in the kitchen. Kevin found a couple of cans of chicken noodle soup. "Just what the doctor ordered," he said.

It was starting to get dark, so Kevin lit one of the lamps. From the kitchen I could see the sunset through the window, and I started to get a creepy feeling. It would be dark soon, and I knew I'd start to imagine things again. I told myself I was being stupid, but as the cabin grew darker I got jumpy. It was like I knew something terrible was going to happen.

I stirred the soup and looked out the window. Kevin looked over my shoulder. "Hey," he said. "Don't burn it!"

I looked down at the pan. It was smoking and bubbling.

"Oops," I said, lifting the pan off the fire. "Sorry, I guess I wasn't paying attention." I scraped the bottom of the pan with the spoon and felt the burned soup sticking.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

"It's okay," Kevin said. "We can eat the stuff on top. It's not *that* burned."

I could hear Slim snoring in the back room. Kevin spooned some of the chicken soup into a bowl and tasted it.

Slim snored again. It was such a loud roar we both looked at the door to the back room.

"*Man*," Kevin said. "No wonder he has no neighbors. It would be like living next door to an airport." He headed toward the back room with a bowl of the soup.

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying not to sound nervous.

"I'm going to go wake him up before he breaks a rib," Kevin said. "Dinner's ready!" he called out.

"Just wait," I said.

Kevin looked at me and frowned. "You're not going to start that Slim-turns-into-animals stuff again, are you? We already talked about that. Everything will be okay. The three of us will eat some chicken soup, and we'll all feel better." He grinned. "Unless maybe later we all turn into chickens."

A growling snore rattled through the back room door.

FRIGHT TIME

"Don't open that door," I said. "I've got a really bad feeling."

"Are you kidding?" Kevin said laughing. "You hear that snore? A few more like that and he'll bring the roof down. We've *got* to wake him up."

Kevin opened the door and disappeared inside. After a couple of seconds, I walked back there. I was shaking. I looked inside. Kevin was staring down at the sofā. I stepped into the room and Kevin turned to me. He was white and his eyes were wide. He just stood there blinking at me with his mouth hanging open.

Slim was lying in the bed. His white hair had turned black and his nose was twitching. His teeth seemed too big for his mouth. It was like they were stretching his lips back and poking out. All the while his snoring grew louder and louder.

Slim's head was on the pillow, but his feet seemed to be creeping toward the end of the bed under the blanket. It was as if he was stretching taller before our eyes. His feet poked out from under the covers, but they weren't human feet. They looked like more like paws, and as I watched, his toe nails became thick and pointed like claws.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

We froze watching him. We were amazed and terrified. I looked back up at his face. It was twisting and bubbling. His ears were pointed now and hair seemed to be sprouting all over his face. His eyes glowed red.

I grabbed Kevin by the arm and we backed out of the door. I closed the door. We walked to the front of the cabin in a daze.

The door behind us was suddenly jolted, and a crack appeared down the middle. The door splintered apart. Scraps of wood flew everywhere. I ducked behind the table. When I looked up there was a huge bear clawing its way through the demolished door. It was so huge it had to drop down on all fours to make it under the empty door frame. Kevin was next to me now. We were hiding behind the table, looking up at this huge bear with its glowing red eyes.

"Okay," I whispered. "Explain this one."

The bear swatted one of Slim's shelves with its paw. The shelf toppled from the wall, spilling books and papers across the cabin floor. The bear stepped closer to where we were hiding and roared. There was no way to get out the cabin door. We were trapped, and this monster was coming closer.

FRIGHT TIME

The kerosene lamp was behind us on the kitchen counter. I knew that bears were afraid of fire, so I stood up and grabbed the lantern. The bear looked at me, noticing me for the first time.

"What are you doing?" Kevin yelled from under the table.

I held the lamp out in front of me, hoping the tiny flame would scare it, but it tilted its head to one side and took another step closer. I held the lamp above my head for a minute and then smashed it at its feet. There was the sudden smell of kerosene, and then the papers and books on the floor burst into flames. The bear howled and stepped back.

"Come on," I said, pulling Kevin to his feet. The two of us dashed for the front door. I opened it and pushed Kevin out. The bear growled and snarled and came bounding toward me. I jumped outside and slammed the door shut.

"Run!" I shouted. "It's coming after us!"



We were off the porch and running through the tall grass when I heard the cabin door burst

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

open. Then I heard the sound of claws pounding across the wooden porch. The porch groaned under the bear's weight.

We had a head start, but I knew that bears can run much faster than people. Our only chance was to get to the woods and find someplace to hide.

As we ran I kept wanting to look back, but I knew that would slow me down, so I didn't. Kevin was about twenty yards in front of me. If the bear got anyone it would be me. My side was beginning to ache.

I leaped over bushes and rocks as I ran. If I lost my footing or twisted my ankle it would be all over—the bear would be on me in a couple of seconds. I could hear him plowing through the grass and bushes behind me. Its snarling and panting were getting closer. It was gaining on me, but I was getting nearer the woods.

Kevin made it to the woods. I couldn't see him anymore, but I could hear him stomping through the twigs and pine needles, and I could see branches moving up ahead. My side felt like it was going to burst when I made it to the first trees. I dashed between the trunks and ducked under low branches as I ran. I hoped that being

FRIGHT TIME

smaller would help me gain some ground. The bear was so big I couldn't see how it could move through these tight spaces as fast as I could.

But once the bear got to the trees, my heart sank. I could hear him crashing through the branches like they were cobwebs. It sounded like a tank coming after me, breaking down branches and tearing up roots, never slowing for a minute.

I heard some splashing up ahead of me, and in a few seconds I could hear water running. It was a wide creek, and the water was running fast. When I got to the edge I could make out Kevin far on the other side in the shadows. He was waving his arms. "Over here!" he shouted over the sound of the rushing water. "Keep on this side of the boulder. It isn't that deep."

In the darkness I could make out a big boulder with the water rushing around it. The growls and snarls behind me were getting closer. I stepped off the bank into the knee-deep water, and the current nearly lifted me off my feet. I took a few unsteady steps. It was up to my thighs and moving fast. I waded in deeper, trying to keep my footing on the loose round stones. The freezing water was up around my waist now.

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

The sound of the bear crashing through the woods stopped suddenly. I looked over my shoulder. The bear had stopped at the water's edge. He dipped a paw in the water and then ambled up and down the bank a bit, like he was looking for a way across.

"Don't stop!" Kevin shouted. "Just keep coming. I'll tell you what he's doing!"

I took another step. A sudden gush of water pulled my feet out from under me. I was completely underwater for a second, rushing downstream with the creek. I struggled to get my head above water. I saw the boulder coming at me and lunged at it. The water threw me up against it. I leaned on it and struggled to my feet. The water was so cold it took my breath away.

"Keep coming!" Kevin shouted. "He's getting in the water!"

I pushed off the rock and stumbled through the water, slipping and sliding downstream.

"Come on!" Kevin shouted, running along the bank to stay even with me. "You're almost there! You can make it!"

There was a big splash behind me. I looked back and saw the bear pulled downstream by the

FRIGHT TIME

current. He pulled himself up on a rock and shook the water from his fur.

"Don't look back!" Kevin shouted. "Keep coming!" He grabbed an overhanging branch and stepped into the water. He stretched out his hand to me. "Come on! You're almost here!"

I took a few more steps and lunged to grab his hand. He gripped my fingers and pulled me to my feet. We scrambled up the muddy bank.

I looked back. The bear was at the big boulder now. When he saw me look at him, he stretched out his neck and roared at me. His eyes were full of fiery anger.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Kevin as I ran behind him into the woods.

"Climb a tree," Kevin shouted back at me. "Up in the smaller branches, the bear can't follow you. He's too heavy. Look for a tree to climb. Quick!"

Most of the trees we were running through were tall pines. We couldn't reach their branches. In a minute we could hear the bear crashing toward us again. We needed a tree—now!

"Over here!" Kevin shouted. He pulled me toward a birch tree. There was a strong branch about five feet off the ground. Kevin jumped up, wrapped his arms around it and then swung his

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

legs up.

I could hear the bear thrashing behind us. Kevin climbed into the higher branches. I leaped up to grab the lowest branch, but I caught it at a bad angle and it slipped from my arms. I landed on my back. The bushes behind me were moving. The bear was only a few yards away.

I jumped again. This time I got myself up on the branch. I clung to it as tight as I could stand to. The bear bounded into view just below me. For a second it couldn't tell where I'd gone. It sniffed around on all fours near the base of the tree, trying to find my scent. I held my breath. My heart pounded. My arms ached. My body froze.

Slowly the bear's gaze crept up the tree. Its red eyes flared when it finally caught sight of me. I scrambled, holding the trunk for balance, but one of my feet slipped off the branch. I almost fell backwards, but I caught a branch above my head just before I toppled. I grabbed the upper branch with my other hand and swung myself up just as the bear leaped up at me. It came so close I could smell its hot breath.

I thought I'd die.

The bear went crazy with rage. It howled and

FRIGHT TIME

roared and growled, clawing at me with its big paws, but I was a couple of feet too high. The fact that I was just out of reach seemed to make it even madder. It threw itself again and again at the tree, trying to get at me.

I looked up. Kevin was white-faced, looking down at me from a couple of branches higher up. "Hang on tight," he said and swallowed hard. I could hear the gulp.

Each time the angry bear threw itself at me, the tree shook, and the branch I was clinging to bounced up and down. I was lying on top of the branch now, my arms and legs wrapped around it, the rest of my body pressing hard against it.

The bear suddenly stopped. It watched me bobbing up and down just out of its reach. It dropped back down on all fours and sniffed around the trunk of the tree again.

"It's giving up!" Kevin called down to me. "It's getting tired. It's going to go hunt up something else."

I was relieved. I started to laugh. The bear moved away from the tree and looked up at us.

"Wimp!" Kevin hollered, laughing.

"Lightweight!" I yelled.

But the bear didn't leave. It sat looking up at

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

us with those burning eyes. It came back to the base of the tree again, and it raised itself up on its hind legs. It wrapped its enormous arms around the trunk.

I looked up at Kevin. He didn't look so happy anymore.

The bear gave the tree a yank. My branch bounced hard. I held my breath and squeezed tighter. The bear began to shake the narrow tree trunk. I began to bounce higher, riding my tree branch. It began to swing from side to side. I was dizzy. My arms ached from holding on. Soon I wasn't lying on top of the branch anymore—I was slipping sideways.

There was no way to get on top again without letting go for a second. But I knew I'd be bear meat if I let go. I looked down at the bear. He was watching me with his burning eyes as he pushed and pulled the tree trunk. It almost seemed to me he had a smile, an evil smile, on his face.

I kept sliding to the side until I was hanging upside down. My whole body ached. My arms were cramping. I knew I couldn't hold on much longer.

I could see Kevin above me. He was sitting on a branch and hugging the tree trunk, looking

FRIGHT TIME

down at me. He looked terrified up there, swaying each time the bear shook the tree.

I could feel my hands begin to slip apart on the branch. "Help," I screamed at Kevin. "I'm going to fall!"

I don't know what I expected him to do. He just hugged his branch tighter.

He couldn't help me.



I was exhausted. My arms felt like they were on fire. My head was spinning from dizziness. I knew I was going to black out and fall out of the tree.

The bear growled crazily from under me. Then my ears began to ring. I thought I saw lights. I heard shouting. As my arms slipped from the branch, I heard a distant popping noise. There was yelping and howling. Then I dropped through the air.

I hit the ground with a thud that knocked the wind out of me. I quickly curled in a ball and squeezed my eyes shut. I waited for pain to shoot through me. I waited for claws and teeth. I heard

IT HUNTS BY NIGHT

myself whimper. Something touched my shoulder. I tensed up.

"Are you okay?" a man's voice asked. I opened my eyes and looked at my shoulder. It was a man's hand on it. I sat up and looked around. I was inside a circle of men in ranger uniforms. All of them held flashlights and some carried rifles. Two of them were helping Kevin down out of the tree.

"That was a close one, son," the ranger said, helping me to my feet. "That was the biggest bear I've ever seen. I hated to have to shoot it."

Kevin was next to me now. We were both speechless.

"We've been looking all over for you two," the ranger said. "Your parents will sure be glad to hear you're okay." He pulled a walkie-talkie from his pack and was about to talk into it when one of the other rangers ran up to him.

"Boss," the other ranger said. "We followed the bear after you hit him. You'd better come look at this."

All of us followed him through the bushes to where two rangers were shining their flashlights on the ground. When we got up next to them we saw that it was Slim lying on his back at the

FRIGHT TIME

base of a tree. His shirt was all red.

"He must have got hit with a stray bullet," someone said.

Kevin looked at me. He was terrified.

"Call in a helicopter," the head ranger ordered. "There'll have to be an investigation. And find that bear. If it's wounded, it could be dangerous." Some of the rangers disappeared among the trees with their rifles and flashlights.

The head ranger looked down at Slim's body. He looked at us. "Do you boys know this man?" he asked. "Do you have any idea how he got here?"

Kevin looked at me as if to ask what we should say.

"Tell him," I said. "Tell him the truth. Tell him the whole story."

Kevin looked around at all the rangers and took a deep breath. "Forget the bear," he began. "You already found him . . ."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

by Mary E. Haggerty

1

Jack lives in an apartment, so we had to build the pyramid in my backyard. Besides, I live next door to the school. I think that's really why Miss Collins asked Jack and me to build it—pretending it was a big honor, and not just a really big job, to make it. "It's going to be the focal point of our Parent's Night exhibition," she told us. "It's going to stand in the center of the auditorium."

That's what worries me. But I worry about

FRIGHT TIME

everything and Jack doesn't worry about anything. Homework, grades, or anything.

We built the framework yesterday. And the whole time Mom was at the back door hollering at us to keep it away from the sundial where her tulip bulbs are starting to grow. That's like telling an elephant where to sleep. I mean, if the pyramid is seven feet high, then it has to be so many feet square at the base, right? Geometry, and all that stuff.

Now it was Saturday and we had gotten an early start so we could finish it and maybe go to a movie later.

"See if it wobbles, Mike," Jack ordered me. He was getting ready to roll out the canvas we were going to use as a cover. We had to get it on really tight so it would look like stone when we finished. Miss Collins had lent us a book about pyramids to use as a guide.

"It's not bad. It'll be steadier when we get the canvas nailed on."

We'd been working all morning. I was starved and ready to go inside and see what I could find to eat. That's when Mollie came out with a plate of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a pitcher of milk. Mollie's my younger sister but

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

you wouldn't know it. She has red hair like Dad and I'm dark like Mom. She's okay. In fact, I like her. Mollie's fun.

She set the platter down. "Mom says to eat these." She gave the pyramid a critical look. "Are you going to paint it?"

"We're just going to paint the outline of stones, is all," Jack answered, wolfing down a sandwich.

We sat on the grass. It felt good just to rest for awhile.

"Can I help?" Mollie picked up the pyramid book and started to look through it.

"Sure, why not," I answered, like I was doing her a favor. Actually, I was getting tired and I knew Jack was, too.

When we finished eating, I went down to the basement to get the paint and brushes while Mollie and Jack took the dishes back to the kitchen. I don't know which one of us let Rags out, but there he was when we came back, running around the yard like a crazy dog, barking with his ball in his mouth. He's little but he's fast. I almost tripped over him and spilled the paint.

Mom left to go shopping. She asked us not to

FRIGHT TIME

let Rags back in the house until she got back. We let him chase his precious ball and went back to work.

I finished painting on my side and walked around to check Jack and Mollie's work. The three of us could finish the fourth side together in no time.

"Aw Mollie, for pete's sake. What are you doing?"

I couldn't believe my eyes. Instead of painting stones, she was standing there painting hieroglyphs out of the book Miss Collins had given us. "That's not what we told you to do. Now you've wrecked it!" I took back all the nice things I had been thinking about her.

"Let me see," said Jack, coming around the side.

"I don't know what you're so upset about," said Mollie calmly. "The Egyptians always painted pictures on their pyramids."

"On the inside, not the outside," said Jack, disgustedly.

"You don't know that," said Mollie. "Anyway, this is the symbol for queen. Now it's a queen's pyramid. So there," she added proudly.

"You'll have to paint it out," I ordered. More

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

time wasted.

The sun was straight up now. I could tell from the sundial.

We stood back to admire our work. A little wind had kicked up and was blowing some of the dirt from the schoolyard into the air. Maybe that's what made it look so real. The sun and the sand. It was like the pyramid had been there for centuries, standing right there in my own backyard. It gave me an eerie feeling.

I could tell Jack thought so too, because he didn't say anything for a bit. Then he said, "How would you like to be a friend of the dead pharaoh? How would you like to be sacrificed just to keep him company in death?"

"Don't say things like that," Mollie ordered. "You're just trying to scare me."

"No, honest, it's true. That's what they did," Jack insisted.

"I don't believe it. Nobody would do something like that," Mollie said.

I wouldn't admit, it but the thought gave me the shivers.

The spell was broken when Rags started to run around us, dropping the ball at our feet, insisting we play with him. I threw the ball under

FRIGHT TIME

the bushes, hoping Rags wouldn't find it for a while. No such luck.

"Let's finish this tomorrow," said Jack. "I'm going to go home. I'm starved." Jack used his stomach for a clock. The only trouble was, his stomach and his mom's kitchen weren't always in sync.

It was then that Rags began acting really strange, running around the pyramid, growling and pawing at the ground furiously, as if there were ten balls inside the pyramid.

"Hey, cut that out, dog. You're gonna wreck it," yelled Jack.

"Stop it, Rags," Mollie scolded. The dirt was flying as Rags dug.

I made a lunge for him but before I could grab him, Rags was gone. He disappeared into the hole he had dug at the base of the pyramid.

"Darn dog," I muttered. "There must be a gopher under there. Jack, help me get him out before you go."

I lay flat on the grass ready to grab Rags while Jack lifted the pyramid. It didn't move.

"I guess I'm hungrier than I thought. I can't budge it," Jack panted, a puzzled look on his face.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"What a wimp! Molly, you slide under and get him when I lift it."

I guess it could have been funny, my straining with all my might to move something so light and not being able to, then all three of us pushing and shoving against it until we were exhausted. But what looked like canvas now felt just like stone—heavy, cold, stone. And Rags was under it!

Mollie fell back onto the grass, her eyes bright with tears. "What's happening? Poor Rags, we'll never see him again! What'll Mom say?"

Panting heavily, Jack put out his arm to rest against the side of the pyramid. A section gave way, not like canvas ripping, but with a heavy, grinding sound, opening inward. Jack fell inside. I heard him scream, as if from far away. "Help me, Mike! Help me! Call the fire department!"

I could hear the terror in his voice. I got down on the grass and peered through the opening. "Oh my gosh! Mollie, run and get me Dad's flashlight," I gasped. "Quick!"

I know this sounds stupid but my lawn—the one I mowed every summer—was gone. There was nothing but a black open pit. It was only by chance that Jack had landed on a narrow ledge

FRIGHT TIME

just below the lip of the opening.

There wasn't time to call the fire department. Jack could slip off at any moment. I had no idea how deep the pit could be.

Mollie was back with the flashlight.

"Mollie, hold my legs. Hold them real tight," I told her.

My heart was pounding as I inched my way close to the edge. The ground was still winter cold but that wasn't why I was shivering.

"Jack, can you see my hand? Can you reach me?" I could barely speak, I was so scared. I wiggled forward a tiny bit more. Just the tiniest bit. But enough to be sucked into the black void, followed by Mollie, who never let go of my legs.

2

I couldn't scream. Heck, I couldn't even breathe. I felt like everything that was inside me had fallen to the bottom and I was just this empty shell falling through space. With what was left of my mind I knew that when Mollie and I had been sucked into the hole we had knocked Jack off the ledge and he was falling, too.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

You don't think when you're falling. All you can do is feel. It's like you're the wind and the air is the wall and you keep hitting it and hitting it. I had no idea how long we had been falling down until, at some point, like breaking the sound barrier, something strange took place.

I wasn't falling anymore. I was floating in the narrow shaft. Gently first bumping against Jack, then Mollie. Sort of like astronauts walking in space. Maybe it was down. But maybe it was up! When my sense of time disappeared, so did my sense of direction. We seemed just to float through the space.

I can't explain it.

At last I landed very softly, along with Jack and Mollie, in front of a large boulder that blocked any further passage through the shaft.

It was quiet. We lay there all tangled up for I don't know how long, until Mollie felt something soft and warm wiggling beneath her.

"Oh Rags! You're alive, you're alive!" she gasped.

Rags slithered out and started slobbering wet kisses all over us. It was hard to get mad at him but there was no way to avoid him either.

"Yuck," said Jack, turning his face away. "This

FRIGHT TIME

is some hole you dug, dog."

The hole! The fall itself had almost made me forget what we'd fallen into. It certainly hadn't been there before we wrapped the pyramid in canvas. Could it be an old mine shaft that had suddenly given way? Things like that happened in our part of Pennsylvania country.

"What do you guys think we fell into?" I asked.

"No mine shaft is this deep, is it? Do you think it was something we did? Maybe I hammered too hard? No, that's crazy." Jack shook his head. "Maybe there was some kind of subterranean earthquake?"

"I don't know what it is," cried Mollie. "I just want to get out. What's Mom going to say?" Mollie hugged Rags close. "She's going to be so worried. And Daddy, too."

But we just lay there, mostly from shock, I guess. The shaft was terribly narrow and it was hard to move. The only way to get out was to move the boulder. Not an easy job. Maybe an impossible one. And who knew what lay beyond? I was getting really scared again.

There was one good thing, though. I still had my flashlight clutched firmly in my hand.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"I can't stand this," Mollie wailed. "My foot's fallen asleep and I just scraped my elbow on the stone. Mike, do something."

"Okay, I guess we can't stay like this."

I propped myself up against Jack for leverage, put my feet against the boulder and pushed. Nothing happened.

"Look, everybody get their feet up here together and when I count three, push as hard as you can. One, two, three . . . push!"

"Ouch! You kicked me," Mollie grunted as Jack's knee shot back into her ribs.

"I can't help it. I'm getting kicked too, you know," Jack complained.

We were miserable, getting kicked and scraped by each other and Rags jumping all over us, barking, loving this new "game". I don't know how long we worked until we heard a crunch. The boulder wedged forward just a fraction. But each scrape of stone against stone gave us hope. At last, with a final shudder, the boulder rolled free.

In that instant, Rags clambered over us and ran through the opening.

"Hurry Mike, go catch him and see where we are," Mollie whispered, like she was telling me

FRIGHT TIME

to go find her classroom the first day of school, or something equally simple.

"Yeah, go see," Jack urged.

I shimmied my way toward the dim light ahead. I was scared to death. But I had no choice. I had to go forward. When I cleared the shaft I stood up slowly. Was I stiff! My body ached everywhere.

I looked around. I was in an empty room with a stone floor and walls. There were no windows. I could see only one other opening. It was going into a very low passageway. I motioned for the others to come in.

"I don't like this room," said Mollie firmly, as she looked around, "it's like a tomb without the body."

Through the low passageway we could hear Rags barking. It was growing more distant.

"Now where's he taking us?" Jack groaned.

We started to follow. It was our only hope. We already knew where the shaft went. Straight up. Mollie and I had to bend over to keep from bumping our heads but poor Jack had to crawl on all fours to make it.

"Good dog," Mollie teased.

"You just wish you were tall," Jack muttered.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"Actually, it's easier to crawl."

He was right. We got down on our hands and knees and started crawling too. It was tough going but soon we could hear noises. It was the ringing of hammers and chisels. So it had to be a mine. But if it was, then where was the light coming from?

When we reached the opening at the end of the passageway the sunlight was blinding. The waves of heat made everything swim in front of our eyes. One thing for sure, it wasn't a mine we had just left. We were high above the ground. We stepped outside and onto a ramp made of stone rubble.

When my eyes got used to the sunlight, I could see palm trees down below and people walking around dressed in loincloths and plain white clothes. In the near distance stood rows of mud huts. I've never been outside of Pennsylvania but I just knew this wasn't Florida or California.

Jack knew, too. "This is weird, really weird," he mumbled.

"You want to know what's really weird," Mollie added. "Look at yourselves." The she stopped and checked herself out. "Oh golly! I

FRIGHT TIME

mean, look at us. I'm weird too."

We were dressed like the people down below in these sort of smocks. Where were our T-shirts and jeans? How could our clothes have changed without our knowing? I still had my flashlight though. That was lucky. Luckier than I even knew at that moment.

The three of us had the same thought at the same time. We turned and looked behind us at a sloping white stone wall. Tilting our heads way back, we could see it was a pyramid! But what made me break out in a cold sweat and my knees buckle, were the workmen struggling to put a block of limestone in place near the top.

I suddenly knew where we were. In Egypt. Egypt 5,000 years ago!

I was scared but I wasn't surprised. Falling through a hole in my backyard to the other side of the earth, that surprised me. But after that, anything was possible. It would be nice to know though, how we got here and even better, how we could get back to Pennsylvania. Back home.

But there wasn't time to think about that right now.

We'd forgotten about Rags until we heard him bark again. Coming toward us up the ramp was

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

a small group of men, pulling a sledge carrying a limestone block. Rags was jumping up and down, nipping at their feet. One of the men tried to kick him, but missed. Mollie screamed, but Jack had the good sense to push her back into the passageway before the men saw her. A good thing too. I never realized how red Mollie's hair is till I saw it in the desert sunlight. It wasn't time to call attention to ourselves. Not yet.



Jack and I knelt down on the rock rubble and pretended we were smoothing it down for the sledge to go over. It was the only thing we could think of fast. And that way they couldn't see our faces.

It took them a long time to get up to where we were. When they did get near us, we backed into the passageway to let them by. Our knees were all scratched and bleeding. The way those guys were sweating and straining in the heat, I could really feel for them.

"Do you think we should tell them to postpone this job till the wheel's invented?" Jack whis-

FRIGHT TIME

pered to me.

Rags was still nipping and barking at them. I grabbed him and pulled him into the passageway with us. I was getting a little tired of Rags leading us into trouble all the time.

When the sledge turned the corner of the pyramid, we started our way down. We didn't know what we were going to do when we got on the ground but we sure couldn't stay up here on top of the pyramid forever.

And I was worried about Mollie. I take that back. I was worried about Mollie's hair. There were a lot of people working down below and they all had black hair. Mollie's hair was glowing like a bonfire. We didn't have a thing to cover her with. Then I saw a grove of palm trees where nobody seemed to be. Shade. That would help us cool off at least.

When we got close to the trees, Rags jumped out of my arms and ran barking toward something. There under a tree, clutching a loaf of bread, was a boy about my age. But it wasn't the boy Rags was barking at. It was the sack of onions at the boy's feet.

"Oh, oh. He thinks they're balls. Now we're in trouble," said Mollie.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

The boy looked as scared as I felt. Maybe that's what gave me the courage to talk to him.

"Hi, my name's Mike. What's yours?" I couldn't believe what was coming out of my mouth. It wasn't English, any more than the clothes I was wearing were my clothes. "And this is Jack and this is Mollie. So what's your name?"

He shrank back further against the tree, pulling the sack of onions with him. One rolled out and Rags grabbed it. This was good because he stopped barking and the boy relaxed a little.

"Anwar," he whispered.

"Anwar, is this really Egypt? It looks like Egypt to us, with the pyramid and all. But is it? You see, we're lost," I ended lamely.

Anwar's eyes darted back and forth, as if to escape from this corner we had backed him into.

"Hey, look. We're not enemies," said Jack. "We just want to know where we are."

"And how to get out of here," I added.

Anwar pointed to Mollie, "What is wrong with her? Why is she that color?"

"What do you mean? What's wrong with me? And what's wrong with my color?" exclaimed Mollie, indignantly. Then she clapped her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide. "Did you hear me?"

FRIGHT TIME

she said. "Did you hear us? I'm speaking Egyptian, too! And I understand it!"

"Hey, could I have one of your onions and a piece of that bread?" asked Jack, hopefully. "I'm starved and, if this is really Egypt, I'll never be home in time for dinner."

Anwar nodded and pulled the bread apart and gave us each a chunk, and then an onion. "I have no beer to give you. I drank it."

"You drink beer?" I couldn't believe it.

"Everybody in Egypt drinks beer. We make it from the bread."

"Don't you have any cola?" asked Mollie.

"Or hamburgers? A hamburger would be great with this bread and onion," said Jack, with his mouth full.

"Seriously, can you help us?" I asked. "We don't know how we got here except that we fell into a hole and ended up inside a room in the pyramid. We're a long way from Pennsylvania and we don't have enough money for plane tickets . . ."

"Plane?"

"Oh, I forgot," I groaned and put my head in my hands. "Guys, we have a problem."

I sat up and looked at Jack and Mollie. Their

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

faces were blank. "Don't you get it? How can we expect people to help us get back to Pennsylvania who haven't even heard of the wheel, forget the airplane. They'll tell us to walk home."

I clutched the flashlight tight in my hands and thought.

The flashlight? Maybe. It was the only thing we had to bargain with.

I turned it on Anwar. He didn't even blink. Even in the shade of the palm trees, the killer sun outshone the beam of light. I tried to explain what it was but he didn't seem to be very interested.

That's when we heard the clatter of the empty sledges and the sounds of the workers coming back down the ramp.

4

Anwar stood up and motioned anxiously for us to follow him as the voices and the grinding sounds of the sledges being pulled over the sand grew louder. He led us quickly down the rocky path, through the gate leading to the mud huts.

"Hurry," he whispered.

FRIGHT TIME

Once inside the gate he began to run, with Rags nipping at his heels. He disappeared into a hut near the end of the last row. Out of breath, we tumbled in after him.

"Is this where you live?" asked Jack in disbelief.

There was nothing in the hut but a fire pit in the center of the room. The doorway was the only source of light.

"Why were you so afraid of the others seeing us?" I asked.

"There have been tomb robberies," said Anwar. "The most awful crime, the crime that robs the dead of eternity. The officials are looking for all strange or suspicious people. And you look very strange. But I don't believe you are tomb robbers."

"We look strange!" Mollie giggled. "Why, if you walked down State Street in that outfit, they'd think you were crazy."

My sister isn't what you'd call tactful.

"Mollie, be quiet," I ordered. "We aren't in Pennsylvania, remember? Anwar is trying to help us, aren't you?" I turned to him. "But how do you know we aren't tomb robbers? You don't know anything about us."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"Tomb robbers are never hungry. At least, I don't think they are," he said.

"But why should you help us? It may get you in trouble."

"Because I know what it feels like to be away from home. I've only been here a short time. My home is on the Lower Nile where my family farm is. I have no friends but Hosi, the baker. I want to help you get back to . . . to where you said you lived."

Oh, wow. This was the best news ever. Then reality set in. If I didn't know a way home, how could Anwar who had never even heard of the wheel, let alone an airplane? Still, it was worth a try.

"How can you help us?"

"First, we must darken your skin. If not, they'll notice you immediately. Then you must leave Giza, at least for the time being, while they are searching. Wait here. I'll be right back."

He returned in a few minutes with two small pots in his hands. "This is kohl. If we rub it on your skin, you will look more Egyptian."

"Oh, what fun!" said Mollie, dipping into the pot of kohl. "I never get to do this at home. Except at Halloween."

FRIGHT TIME

"But your hair," said Anwar, looking at Mollie. "It looks like sunset on the Nile. We must do something about your hair."

"I beg your pardon," Mollie said angrily.

"The sunset on the Nile is very beautiful," said Anwar, with a smile, "only we usually see it over the water, not on our shoulders."

"Okay, I get you," Mollie agreed. "I certainly don't want to be captured as a tomb robber and have to go to jail. But what can I do?"

Anwar thought for a minute. "Wait here. I'll be right back."

He returned moments later holding up a black wig like a battle trophy. "I borrowed it from my neighbor," he said with a sly smile, "who borrowed it from a pile of refuse at the scribe's house. He won't miss it for a few days."

"I love it!" Mollie exclaimed. "Do you have a mirror so I can see what I look like?"

"Workers have no mirrors. We'll go down to the river later and you can see your reflection there."

"Okay," said Jack, as he finished covering himself with the powder. "How about me? How do I look? Do I look Egyptian? You're the only one we've seen close up."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"You'll pass. Now I must run. Remember, stay inside." With that, Anwar left.

That's when I started to feel really down. Out in the sunshine the world looked pretty good. But here, in a mud hut, sitting on a dirt floor, with no hope of getting home, I was really bummed. Jack's snoring saved me. If he could sleep, so could I. Mollie put her head on my shoulder, Rags curled up with his onion, and we slept.

"Am I late? Did the bell ring yet?" grumbled Jack, stirring reluctantly. "What time is it, anyhow?"

"Shhh," Anwar warned, gently shaking him awake. "The day is over. I brought a fish to cook for dinner before we go to the barge."

"Yuck, I hate fish," Mollie blurted as she sat up and stretched. "Oh! I'm sorry, Anwar. That was rude. I just wasn't awake yet."

I wasn't awake either but Anwar's words made me sit up. "What barge? Where are we going?"

The dark street outside the hut was bustling now with the people coming home after their day's work. The only light came from the lit fires within the huts.

FRIGHT TIME

"Listen closely," whispered Anwar, as we gathered around the fire both to cook the fish and for warmth. Giza was chilly once the sun went down.

"I overheard my friend Hosi talking to a mason who stopped by the bakery today. There is going to be a barge leaving in the morning for Aswan. They will be picking up a cargo of granite for the pyramid. My plan is to take you to the barge tonight where you can stow away. They won't be searching for the tomb robbers at Aswan. Stay there for a few days while I try and work out a plan for you to return home." He hesitated. "If, indeed, such a thing is possible."

For a moment we were all quiet. The thought was unbearable.

The fish began to sizzle over the fire, our first smell of food cooking since our adventure began. The fire cast shadows on the walls of the hut.

"Does this remind you of camp last summer? Remember the camp song?" Mollie began humming it softly. It didn't seem right somehow to shout it out the way we did at Cherokee Lake.

The mood was definitely mellow as we sat eating fish, bread, and onions with our fingers. The hut which had seemed so ugly at first, now

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

seemed warm and homey.

"Would you like some apricots?" asked Anwar. "These are from a tree on my family's farm. My mother dried them and gave them to me before I left."

"I'd love some," Mollie replied with enthusiasm this time.

When he saw us licking our fingers when we finished, Anwar passed around a clay pot of water so we could wash.

I was curious. "How did you come here, Anwar?"

"One day I was working in the field harvesting our crop . . ."

"What crop? What do you grow?"

"Wheat. And the pharaoh's men came up to me and told me when the Nile overflowed I must come to Giza to work in the bakery to provide bread for the workers. I had never been away from home and I was excited to come to where the pharaoh lives and to see the pyramid being built. I shall never forget seeing it for the first time. But I suppose you have seen many more wonderful things than the pyramid."

"No, not really," we all agreed. It seemed the right thing to say.

FRIGHT TIME

"I'm fortunate not to be hauling the rocks or pulling the sledges. Soon I shall have to do that work, too. It is going to take many rocks to finish the pyramid. The workers can only pull such heavy loads for a short time before their backs can't stand the strain anymore.

"I didn't know then that I would miss my family so much. It's all right though," he continued confidently. "Soon it will be time to plant again and the pharaoh's men will take me home."

"Tell us more about the tomb robbers, Anwar. Do you know who they are?"

"The workers have their suspicions. We see the Keeper of the Tombs in places where he should not be, talking to some of the stone masons who are not good men. They steal. Only little things now. But who knows? The pharaoh trusts the Keeper and we have no proof so there is nothing we can do."

The fire was just ashes now. The street was empty. The workers were sleeping, for a few precious hours before they began their grueling work again.

"Come," Anwar ordered. "We must leave now. It is time to go to the barge."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

5

Anwar led the way as we crept along the narrow alley separating the huts. I could hear the snores and grunts of the sleeping workers. They sounded like my dad. I guess some things never change.

When you live in the suburbs, there's always some kind of light at night but not here. It was pitch black out, not even a star in the sky. And I couldn't use my flashlight for fear of being seen.

When we got past the huts and into the open desert, we took off our sandals and let the warm sand sift through our toes as we walked toward the river. It felt good. I carried Rags. If he got loose out here in all this blackness, we'd never find him.

Anwar was right ahead of me. He kept looking around as if he expected somebody to jump out at us. From where? I wondered. There was nothing but sand as far as I could see. But Anwar made me nervous. Robbing a tomb must be the worst crime they had. If we were caught, how would we ever explain who we were and

FRIGHT TIME

where we came from?

When I heard the water, I felt the black silt ooze up between my toes. It made me think of that Halloween game where they blindfold you and stick your hand into a pot of warm spaghetti and somebody tells you it's worms, or worse. Yuck!

Anwar stopped. In front of us was the Nile River and the barges.

"Which one is it?" I hissed. "Can you tell?"

"No, not really," Anwar answered, hesitantly. There were several barges tied up at the landing. They were long, low, and flat, still heavy with their unloaded cargo of granite.

Anwar grabbed my arm, pointing to the barge anchored farthest out in the river. "That must be the one. Look, it is empty except for the coils of rope."

"Yeah, but how will we get to it? We'll have to swim out there."

"You won't mind swimming. The water is much warmer than the night air. But we must be very quiet. Come, follow me."

Mollie poked me in the back. "Hey, we can't swim out there. What about my wig? And all this kohl dust? It'll wash off."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"She's right. We have to find another way."

"Let's get closer to the landing where we can see better," said Jack.

At the water's edge, we could see another empty barge that had been hidden from view. "It could be that one," said Anwar, doubtfully. "Or it could be the other one over there."

"Eenie, meenie, meinie, mo," said Jack. "I vote for this one. It's closer." He waded in. Jack's seen a lot of action movies.

"Boy, are we going to look silly, all black with white feet," Jack chuckled, as we pulled ourselves up onto the barge. "Maybe they'll think we're some kind of strange, exotic bird."

"If they think you're an ibis, you're safe," Anwar said. "Egyptians never kill the ibis. But please remember to rub black silt on your feet when you get off the barge at Aswan. It would be better if they did not notice you."

Once on board the empty barge, we crept along the deck and hid ourselves as best we could in the stern, huddling by the coils of rope. All we had to do now was sit quietly and wait until sunrise when the barge would leave for Aswan.

But now I started to really worry. If we were

FRIGHT TIME

going to Aswan to avoid being found, maybe the real tomb robbers were, too! Maybe they were on one of the other barges right now. Or, and this was even more scary, maybe the officials were on a barge waiting to catch the thieves making a getaway.

From our hiding place we watched the moon come out from behind the clouds. It made the pyramid glow. It was kind of like watching TV. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

"Oh, how beautiful," breathed Mollie. "But why is the pyramid that shape? Our buildings go straight up and down."

"Because the pharaoh receives his power from the sun god. The pyramid is shaped like the rays of the sun."

"Oh, I see," Mollie replied, impressed with this new knowledge. "At least, I think I see."

"I'll go back now," said Anwar. "You have a long journey, but if you are careful, you should be safe. They won't need the rope until they start to load the granite. After a few days pass, return to Giza and meet me at the hut by the bakery where the supplies are stored. I'll watch for you there. If there is no way for you to return to your

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

home, I'll take you home with me. But I'm sure that whatever brought you here will return you safely to your family." Anwar gave us a comforting smile.

"You're cool, Anwar," I said. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

Just then the barge started to rock gently back and forth. Deep voices could be heard near the forward section of the barge. We watched, paralyzed, as several men climbed aboard, took up the oars and began to paddle. The barge started to move away from shore. We were on our way to Aswan.

All of us. Anwar, too.

"Oh, this is awful. Just awful," moaned Anwar softly, holding his head in his hands. "Hosi will be so angry with me. He will send the other bakers to look for me and when they find me, they will find you. We will all be in terrible danger."

"We're sorry. We didn't mean to get you in trouble," comforted Mollie, patting him on the shoulder.

We could hear the men talking. Their voices

FRIGHT TIME

were rough, even when they laughed. They sounded mean. Maybe that was my imagination, but when you're scared you think all sorts of crazy things.

The moon went behind the clouds again as the barge floated up the Nile. We couldn't see either shore and we didn't dare talk or move. It felt as if we were stuck sitting in the shaft again.

Anwar sat straight up, tense and rigid. Jack, on the other hand, fell asleep. Mollie and I held Rags, muzzling his mouth against any barking, and leaned against the coils of rope. I guess we were both thinking about the same thing. Home.

Then Jack began to snore. And can he snore! I slapped my hand over his mouth and Anwar shook him. "Wake up, Jack," he whispered. "Wake up, you're making too much noise."

Jack's head snapped back. "I fell asleep. Are we at Aswan already?"

"Hush," warned Mollie. We held our breath, waiting to see if the men had heard us. I guess they didn't.

I started to relax a little but the barge began to slow down just then. Anwar was on the alert. "This is very strange. We can't be anywhere near Aswan."

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

Forward, those men not rowing were stirring and stretching. One walked toward us, stopping only a few feet away. "Oh please clouds, stay in front of the moon," I prayed. I didn't start breathing again until he walked away.

We could hear the men wade ashore. Then they disappeared into the silence of the black desert.

Jack stood up and stretched, "Okay, I give up. Where are we? And what do we do next?"



Anwar looked out into the night, calculating how far we had traveled. "This must be Dashur," he said.

"Dashur? What's at Dashur?" I asked.

"Nothing but two pyramids," answered Anwar. "The pyramids of the pharaoh's parents."

"Oh,oh!" I groaned. "That means those men are either the tomb robbers or the officials searching for them." Either way it spelled trouble for us. My bet was they were tomb robbers.

"Well, there's only one way to find out. Let's go," said Jack, climbing over the side of the

FRIGHT TIME

barge.

I wished for the hundredth time that Jack didn't see so many adventure movies. Still, I knew he was right. We had to find out what was going on if we wanted to save ourselves. The rest of us climbed over the side and followed him.

Soon we were in the desert sand again. We could make out the fresh footprints. We trudged on without speaking. Over the top of a dune we saw the pyramids and the glow from a fire two of the men were starting.

"This is close enough," I ordered. "Get down flat behind this dune. We'll watch. If they are the tomb robbers, we'll know soon enough. When they leave, they may get close enough for us to see them. We'll figure out what to do after that."

As we watched, the men made trip after trip inside the pyramid, coming out with heavy sacks. They could be full of only one thing—burial treasures.

In the light of the fire, we could see the faces of two of the men. Anwar got all excited. "That one is a baker. I know him. Wait till I tell Hosi. One of his own men is robbing the tomb of the queen," said Anwar sadly.

Mollie nudged me. "The queen's pyramid, re-

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

member? Just like my hieroglyph."

I did remember. Pure coincidence, I thought. But I didn't believe it myself. Was it an accident that we were here? Or had somebody sent us?

There was no doubt now these men were the tomb robbers. After endless trips into the pyramid, two of the men came out and threw what appeared to be old clothes onto the fire.

Anwar moaned and lay with his head in his hands. "They have destroyed the queen's mummy."

His face was full of pain. I felt kind of sick to my stomach.

"What did he say?" Mollie insisted, pulling at me. "What did he say?"

"Nothing. You're too young to hear." Amazingly, she didn't ask again.

I thought how I would feel if robbers destroyed something I held precious. All I could think of right then was the Liberty Bell. But they couldn't do much to that, except maybe crack it again.

The robbers were picking up their sacks. They started coming toward us on their way back to the barge. Rags had been really good so far but I could feel him squirming to get loose.

FRIGHT TIME

Four of the robbers passed not fifteen feet from us while the last robber, the baker, trailed behind. I got a tighter grip on Rags. Maybe it was too tight. When the baker came near us, Rags lost it and began barking furiously.

I froze. So did the robber. Then he started toward us, this menacing form. There was no place for us to run. He was so close now I could hear him breathe. He had a large stick in his hand and he held it up, ready to strike.

In my terror, I clutched the flashlight tightly. It was then that I must have accidentally pushed the switch. Suddenly, in the black sky, it threw out a brilliant beam of light, a light in the shape of an upside down pyramid!

The robber dropped his two sacks and let out a shriek of horror. First, he fell to his knees. Then he ran into the night after the others, waving his hands, still screaming in the most blood-chilling way. I couldn't believe it. I turned to Anwar.

But he pulled away from me, his face full of fear, his body trembling. "Who are you? Who are you really?" he asked in a low voice.

"I'm Mike, Anwar. Just Mike." I felt sick. It's awful to lose the trust of your friend. I knew it

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

had to be the flashlight that scared him, that scared the robber, too.

"Hey Mike, he's never seen a light like that before, only fire," said Jack. "You'd be scared, too."

"Sure I would. I'm scared now. There's lots of things that scare me. Like why are we here? Who or what wants us here?"

Anwar was still trembling. Mollie laid her hand on his arm and began to talk softly. "Remember when we met you, Anwar? Remember how Mike showed you his flashlight that he brought from our home? We call it an electric light. Everybody in Pennsylvania has one. There's nothing magic about it."

"It's not from the sun-god?" Anwar whispered.

"No," said Mollie, shaking her head. "Well, only indirectly maybe."

Somehow her voice calmed him. He could look at me now. I held the flashlight out to him, "Here, you try it."

He shook his head and pulled away. "No. Not yet."

We got up from the sand and headed for the pyramid. Something told us what we had to do. We couldn't just run away to Aswan. We had to

FRIGHT TIME

stay in Giza and stop these robbers before we could even think of going home.

7

We picked up the two sacks of treasure the robber had dropped. It was very important to Anwar that we put the treasure back into the pyramid. Frankly, I didn't look forward to doing this but I didn't know how not to without looking like a wimp in front of my sister and the guys.

The moon stayed behind the clouds. The pyramid was a looming black hulk that seemed ready to devour us. Okay, I know that sounds crazy, but that's the way I felt. I wanted desperately to turn on the flashlight, but I was afraid of Anwar freaking out again. So we crept slowly in the dark toward the tomb. Luckily, the robbers had left the stone that sealed the opening off to the side when they pried it loose.

I steadied myself against the side of the wall as I led the way down into the burial chamber. Mollie was behind me, whimpering softly. That really helped because that's what I wanted to do,

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

only now I didn't have to. She did it for me.

Jack was behind Mollie, carrying one sack, followed by Anwar with the other. Then Anwar slipped on the smooth stone steps. He caught himself before we all fell, but it was enough for me.

"Look Anwar. I've got to turn on the flashlight so we can see. There's nothing to be afraid of. It's not the sun-god. It's just me, Mike, turning on an ordinary flashlight. Okay?"

"Okay." He didn't sound convinced, but it was enough for me. I turned on the flashlight.

That's when Mollie screamed. Really screamed. The light was shining on a bigger-than-life gold statue of the queen. She was looking down at us with one shiny green eye. My heart was pumping so hard, I thought it was going to burst right out of my chest.

Jack and Anwar opened the sacks and threw the treasures on the floor of the chamber. Then we all ran up the stairs and out of there as fast as we could.

It was bright enough now to see what we were doing. The first thing Anwar said to do was to bury the glowing embers of the robbers' fire

FRIGHT TIME

under sand out of respect for the spirit of the queen. We each threw a handful of sand on the fire until only a faint glow remained. Then Anwar knelt down to honor the queen with a moment of silence. Mollie knelt down, too.

Taking the empty sacks with us, Jack and I started to walk, making our plans as we went. After all, Anwar could identify the robber and surely his friend, Hosi, would believe him. We would go to the officials and tell them we had put back the rest of the treasure. Maybe then they would help us get home.

Anwar caught up with us. I turned to see where Mollie was. She was picking up something from the embers.

"Hurry up," I hollered. It was going to be a long hike back to Giza. It was better to do it before the sun came up. If we hurried, Anwar would be at the bakery on time. Hosi would not have missed him. There would be less explaining to do.

"What's that you have in your hand?" I asked Mollie. "What did you pick up?"

"Just some pretty glass. See," she said.

I saw all right. The pretty glass was an emerald the size of a walnut. I remembered seeing

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

one like it before. Of course! This was the queen's other eye, the missing one.

"Oh Mollie, why do you do things like this?" I wailed. I was almost hysterical. As if we weren't in enough trouble already. "What if somebody stops us and you have that emerald? Then what'll we do? You should have just left it there!"

"Is it that valuable? I honestly thought it was just glass and that's why the robbers left it." From the dumb look on her face, I knew she really thought that.

Anwar stopped short. "We must go back. We must return it to the queen—now." He was upset. It was lucky for Mollie that he trusted her.

"Look, Anwar, I know how you feel and I agree. We'll certainly return the emerald to the queen. But if we go back, you'll be late getting to the bakery. We can't afford to have Hosi angry with you right now."

Anwar sighed and reluctantly agreed. "You are right. Let's keep going."

"Gee, I wish I had a little sister," said Jack, innocently. But we both knew what he meant.

"We can share," I told him.

Poor Rags was having a hard time keeping up with us in the deep sand. I opened a sack and he

FRIGHT TIME

jumped in, happy for the ride.

As we trudged on, we kept planning. But something was still troubling me. And I just couldn't figure out what it was.



The sun was just starting to come up by the time we reached Giza. We were able to slip into the city without being seen. When we reached Anwar's hut, I broke the news to Mollie.

"Okay, It's time to put our plan into action. Mollie, I'm sorry you can't come with us but even with that wig, you don't make it as an Egyptian. After we talk to Hosi later today, we'll come and get you. You and Rags stay in the hut out of sight. Maybe you'd better tie him up."

Then I remembered. "And, oh yeah, give me that emerald." I tucked it securely into my loincloth. My loincloth! I still couldn't believe what was happening.

For once Mollie did as she was told. It seemed like I had things under control but something was still bugging me. If I could only figure out what it was.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

As for Mollie, I should have known better.

Anyway, we three guys headed for the bakery. If Anwar was going to talk Hosi into giving us jobs today, we'd better be early.

When we got there Hosi was alone, piling wood onto the fire pit, and apparently lost in thought. He didn't hear us coming, I guess, because he looked up with a startled expression on his face. He was a big man. The biggest man I had seen in Egypt, so far.

When he saw Anwar, he smiled. But in that split second before he smiled, I got that uneasy feeling again. This time I paid attention to it. I think it was the smile. It was only on his lips, not in his eyes. Still, he was Anwar's friend and we needed help. His help.

"Hosi, these two boys are relatives of my neighbor back home. They live in the delta. They must travel back tomorrow but they have nothing to barter for their food. Could you give them work today in exchange for some bread?"

How could anybody turn Anwar down, I wondered. He was such a neat guy. But we stood there getting more and more nervous while Hosi looked at Jack and then at me. I felt like the kohl dust was crumbling and blowing off my face

FRIGHT TIME

under his sharp, piercing eyes. Only my imagination, I told myself, since Jack's face still looked okay.

"The delta? Why are you here then, so far from home?" His voice was deep and rumbling. When somebody talks like that, you pay attention.

Oh gosh, why was I here? Why was I so far from home? I wanted him to tell me. But he stood there waiting for an answer. I looked at Jack for help.

"Well, you see it's like this." Jack was squirming like Rags in the sack. I could see the wheels turning as he thought of something to say. "We, uh, wanted to see the pyramid and, uh, everything. But we didn't plan very well. So when we saw Anwar here, we asked him if he could help us. He said he couldn't but that you were a great guy and you'd know what to do."

Hosi's face was like a mask. I don't know if he believed Jack's story or not. We stood there for what seemed like an hour before he answered. He looked down at his unlit fire and decided to take a chance on us.

"Only for today," he grunted. "You," he said, pointing to Jack. "Start the fires. Anwar will show you how. You, come with me." I followed

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

him. "You start stirring the dough."

By now the sun was up and the day had begun. The three of us were waiting impatiently to see if the robber bakers would report to work. Many workers came. It takes a lot of bread to build a pyramid, but not the robbers.

The morning wore on and the aroma from the baking bread was making my stomach growl. I realized then that we really did need to earn our own bread. Anwar had been sharing his with the three of us and that wasn't fair to him.

The missing bakers still had not shown up. Hosi paced up and down, checking each work station, becoming more and more impatient with the workers. He began cracking his knuckles as he walked.

The work was getting done. The two bakers did not seem to be missed by anybody else. Why was he upset? Did he know something?

Outside the low wall of the bakery, I saw the mason who had robbed the tomb the night before. He was probably the one who had told Hosi about the barge leaving for Aswan. He was gesturing wildly to Hosi. It was right then that I had the answer to what had been bothering me.

Hosi knew about the barge. Hosi knew the

FRIGHT TIME

mason and the bakers. Hosi was probably a member of the gang. Maybe even the leader! Poor Anwar.

Poor us.

The two bakers were outside the entrance, sitting on the ground. The one I had shone the light on last night appeared to be in a state of shock. He was still trembling and his eyes did not seem to focus.

Hosi walked over to them. I couldn't hear the conversation but I really didn't need to. I knew what they were saying. Whatever Hosi said quieted them down. But they didn't leave.

Hosi returned to the bakery. He stood still and looked at each worker. Anwar and Jack were bent over the hot fire. He seemed to look at them a long time. Then he motioned for the mason to come in. They whispered, then looked at Anwar and Jack again. The mason shrugged his shoulders. I was pretty sure he couldn't identify us. It had been too dark. And the flashlight was never on us, only on the baker. Still, we were the strangers in town. When they looked over at me, I decided it was time to quit my job at the bakery.

First, I had to get rid of the emerald. If I was caught with it on me, I'd be arrested for sure.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

That's when I had the brainstorm. I dropped the emerald into the dough and gave it one last stir.

Sometimes you can be very smart and things still don't work out. And then other times you get lucky. This was one of those other times for me. At that moment, the gong struck for the morning break. The Egyptian workers weren't any different than they are in America, I discovered. They dropped what they were doing and headed out of the bakery. The three of us lost ourselves in the crowd. Hosi and the robbers couldn't stop us without creating a scene.

We headed for the hut. We headed that way but we didn't get there.

"Why is it that when you're in a hurry, you always get stuck in traffic?" asked Jack, trying to elbow his way through the crowd of people.

"What's going on, anyway?" I turned to Anwar. "It isn't usually this crowded, is it? Is it some sort of holiday?"

He looked puzzled and shrugged his shoulders. We kept pushing our way through. Hosi would be catching up with us. The crowd wasn't noisy. In fact, the strange part was how quiet everyone was. "Find out what's going on," I whispered to Anwar. He asked the man in front of him.

FRIGHT TIME

"It's a procession led by the pharaoh," the man replied. "His mother's tomb was robbed last night. Her treasures were all stolen, not a thing was left. Only her mummy was not destroyed. The pharaoh is looking for a new burial site near his pyramid. He is very, very angry."

"How did he find out?" Anwar asked. Good question.

"The Keeper of the Tombs reported it to him this morning."

The Keeper of the Tombs, of course! How simple. Who better to know when and how to perform the robberies? The man Anwar and the good bakers knew to be evil. He was working with Hosi and the others. He didn't know yet that two of the sacks of treasure had been returned. And if he knew the queen's mummy had been destroyed, he wasn't telling the pharaoh.

That piece of information could be the only thing to save us. We had no time to lose.



There we were, trapped in the middle, Hosi and his men chasing us from behind and the

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

crowd blocking our way ahead.

Over the heads of the crowd I could see the solemn procession making its way toward the pyramid, led by the pharaoh himself, his face full of grief and rage. I shuddered. What if the officials didn't believe us!

"Oh, oh! Don't turn around," said Jack, giving me the elbow.

Naturally, I turned around. Fighting their way through the crowd and getting close were Hosi and the other robbers, their faces as full of rage as the pharaoh's. Only the grief was missing. They were desperate. They knew now we knew, but they didn't know if we could prove it. Neither did we.

The only one still missing from this scenario was Mollie, but Mollie never misses anything. I should have remembered that. Because there she was, just a few feet from us in the crowd, watching the pharaoh like she was some tourist on vacation. All she needed was a camera. She still had the squirming sack flung over her shoulder. Rags.

The heavy silence of the crowd was shattered by Hosi and the others shouting, "Stop those boys. They are the thieves. Stop those thieves!"

FRIGHT TIME

We tried that old trick of looking around us to see who they meant. But it only took one second to know that it wouldn't work. We broke loose and started to run. A mistake. We headed for the alley and Anwar's hut, Hosi, the robbers, and the crowd in hot pursuit.

But Mollie! I couldn't leave her behind. Mom and Dad would never forgive me. I shouldn't have worried. She was running right behind me. "Stop," she panted. "Listen, stop running. There's no place to run to. Let them catch us."

She was right. There was no place to go. We had to stand our ground and prove who the culprits were. After all, that's what we had come back to do. Besides, we were innocent.

We were surrounded now. The pharaoh had separated himself from the crowd. Mollie's wig had slipped off and dripping sweat had made white rivers down all our faces. It was the time for truth.

The robbers recognized the sack Mollie was carrying. "There! There is the treasure," they shouted triumphantly. Hosi had a wicked smile. "Open the sack, you thieves," he ordered.

Being a good girl, Mollie did as she was told. A dozen onions rolled out, followed by a yelping

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

Rags set free to do what he did best, chase balls. He ran into the crowd chasing the onions and knocking people over. Hosi and the robbers were dumbfounded.

By now Rahotep, who Anwar whispered to me was the top official second only to the pharaoh, was on the scene. His men broke up the crowd, picked up Rags, and brought all of us to Rahotep's residence. There a court of officials, including the Keeper of the Tombs, heard our case.

With Anwar's help, we told them the fantastic story of how we arrived in Egypt. I didn't expect them to believe us. I wouldn't have. They didn't. They just looked at each other and shook their heads. Then they'd look at Mollie and shake their heads again. We tried to tell them about the night of the robbery but the Keeper of the Tombs kept shushing us.

They probably would have arrested us right then and there if it hadn't been for him. He started carrying on about "evil strangers" and the "good citizens like Hosi and the others." Rahotep looked at us and then at Hosi and those others. When he looked back at us the expression on his face was a little like Mom's when we'd come in out of the rain all soaked. I think he felt

FRIGHT TIME

sorry for us. We sure were a mess. I also think he didn't like the Keeper of the Tombs very much.

Rahotep stood up and glared at the Keeper. "Quiet! We will get to the truth of this matter. We will go to Dashur now. Provide enough food and supplies to spend the night."

Soon we were once again floating up the Nile. Only this time we had an armed guard standing over us. I could hardly look at Anwar, I felt so guilty about all the trouble we'd caused him.

Then I got angry, angry at Miss Collins. It was all her fault that we were in this mess. Getting angry helped, even though it only lasted for a minute. I knew I couldn't really blame her.

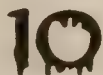
Up front, Hosi and his men were laughing and joking with each other. My heart sank. They seemed so sure we would be arrested for their crime. How could we fight back? It was their country. We were the ones who didn't belong here. We didn't even belong in their century.

Jack and Anwar were as down as I was. I could tell. And poor Mollie! She was only nine. At least I was twelve. I had been to a dance. Only

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

one and it wasn't much fun. But Mollie might not get to go to even one.

The barge drew close to the bank. We were back at Dashur. The guards herded us off and we started over the desert, back to the pyramid of the queen.



The sun was starting to set as the pyramid came into view. All of a sudden I hated it. I wanted to be home in Pennsylvania where everything is familiar to me. And it's all beautiful to me. It hurt to think I'd never see it again. As for Mom and Dad, I couldn't even bear to think of them and what they'd be going through with their kids just disappearing like that.

The guards sort of shoved the four of us to where they wanted us to be and made us sit. It wasn't like they were really rough or anything but still it's not very pleasant when you're not used to being held prisoner.

I wondered if they would take us into the pyramid right away. The thought of their discovering the queen's empty coffin scared the

FRIGHT TIME

heck out of me. I had seen Anwar's outrage at this crime. I could only imagine how the man Anwar called the vizier and the other officials would react.

They were off by themselves, having a serious conversation from the looks of it. The Keeper of the Tombs was still doing most of the talking. That spelled trouble for us. I held my breath. At last the visier turned to speak.

"Attention," he commanded. "We will wait until dawn to enter the pyramid. I want our suspects to have time to dwell on the seriousness of this crime. Guards, prepare the food. We will eat and then rest till morning."

The Keeper didn't seem too happy with this decision. Neither was Jack. "A whole night of waiting. I can't stand it," he groaned.

I knew how he felt. Like, let's just get it over with. This whole thing was a nightmare.

The guards started a fire to cook the meal. I noticed they very carefully did not build it on the site of the other fire. Could it be that Rahotep already suspected the truth? I hoped so.

It's a funny thing the way I can always eat no matter how lousy I feel. At least I could tonight. They were barbecuing beef.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"Oh man, do you smell what I smell?" Jack sat up straight and sniffed. So did Rags. As bad as things were I had to laugh. They looked so comical and so alike.

It was a real letdown to be served another piece of fish instead. The meat was for the officials. Hey! What if this was our last meal!

It was dark now, as dark as the night of the robbery. Eating quieted everybody down. Even Hosi and his henchmen stopped talking and laughing long enough to chew. Poor Anwar, to have been fooled by such a man. I saw the disappointment in his eyes.

By the flickering light of the fire, the guards passed around loaves of bread for all of us to share. It seemed so long ago since this morning when I had stirred the dough, maybe for the very loaf I held in my hand.

A jolt went through me. How could I have forgotten? But so much had happened so quickly. The emerald! It could be in one of these loaves. But there were so many loaves baked this morning and so few of them here, surely the emerald...

I didn't have time to finish the thought. The vizier let out a howl of pain and grabbed his jaw.

FRIGHT TIME

Everybody stopped eating and looked. The vizier was a very dignified man. He didn't howl without a reason.

He withdrew his hand and looked down in amazement. Then he held up for all to see—the queen's emerald. The stone was so large and so brilliant, even in the dark shadows it shone.

Mollie's mouth dropped open and she looked at me for an answer. I couldn't tell her. There was no chance, because after that everything went wild. The mason lunged at Hosi, hissing like a snake. "You traitor, you child of the underworld, cheating us, I'll kill you," he shouted.

I almost felt sorry for Hosi. He was completely surprised. After all, he didn't know the emerald was in the bread. But I sure wasn't going to tell anybody. I watched the Keeper of the Tombs. He looked like he was about to faint, wobbling back and forth. But he said nothing. Then the other bakers and masons got into the brawl. Wow, was it exciting! The vizier, with a smile of satisfaction on his face, ordered the guards to round up Hosi and his men.

With their hands tied behind their backs, they faced their accusers. The vizier glared at them. Then he turned to us. "You said you returned

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

some of the treasure. Is there anything else we should know?"

Anwar's eyes filled. He tried to speak but no sound came out. The vizier seemed to understand.

"Then we will enter the pyramid. The truth will soon be known."

The guards lit fire torches and led the way. It didn't seem so scary to me this time. When we reached the room where the statue of the queen stood, the vizier bowed his head. He held out his hand holding the emerald, as if to say, "It shall soon be returned, my queen."

And there on the floor were the jewels and treasures right where we had thrown them. The vizier nodded his head in approval. Then he said in a grim voice, "On to the tomb."

Hosi and his gang tried to escape, but the guards closed in. The Keeper of the Tombs walked like a zombie among the officials. In the tomb room, the officials looked down on the empty coffin. Some had tears running down their cheeks. His anger really showing, the vizier ordered everyone to leave and the entrance to the pyramid sealed.

Once outside, the guards prepared to lead the

FRIGHT TIME

criminals to the barge for the return trip to Giza. That's when Hosi lost it. He pointed at the Keeper of the Tombs and began screaming, "He is the guilty one. Ask him where the treasure is. Ask him. This was all his idea."

"Nonsense," said the Keeper, frowning. "These are the ravings of a guilty man."

For once, I agreed with Hosi. Why should the Keeper go free? I clutched my flashlight, not out of fear this time.

I aimed the light into the sky and then slowly down on the Keeper's face. I smiled with satisfaction.

The reaction of the Egyptians, the officials and the robbers alike, was stupendous. It was only the arc of the flashlight beam to us, but for them, it was as if the gods had spoken. And there was no mistaking what they said. With the light flashed on the Keeper's face and near blinding him, the verdict was in.

Guilty, man!

That left us free maybe, but still in old Egypt. We still didn't know how we'd gotten there, and for sure we didn't know how we'd get back.

Or if we would.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

11

After the Keeper of the Tombs had been tied up and carted off with the others, Rahotep came over to us. He was still shaken by the light appearing from the sun god but his belief was so strong, he was able to accept it without question. I tucked my flashlight into the waist of my loincloth, safely out of sight. There was no point in pushing our luck.

"I do not understand who you are, or how you arrived in Egypt. But you have earned my trust. Now how may I repay you?" Rahotep asked.

"Can you get us home?" Mollie blurted out before Jack or I could speak. She was holding Rags tightly. It was like she was four and he was her teddy bear. She looked as if she was going to cry. Who could blame her?

Rahotep put his hand on her shoulder. "That may be the one thing I cannot do for you. I have no idea where, uh . . ."

"Pennsylvania."

"Where Pennsylvania is. But I have a suggestion. You have been a good friend to the

FRIGHT TIME

queen. Go back to her pyramid and ask her spirit to help you. You have seen for yourselves how powerful her spirit is, how she was able to bring justice to the Keeper of the Tombs. Surely, she will help you. I will have the guards remove the stone."

Sure, and the gods help those who help themselves, I thought, checking to see if my flashlight was still there. Rahotep meant well. He was a good man. But there just wasn't anything anybody could do.

Even Jack, who never let anything get him down, looked defeated. Mollie was crying silent tears. And me, I just felt empty, inside and out. I had nothing left to carry on with.

That's when Anwar stepped in. "Come," he said gently. "Let us at least try. Rahotep is a wise man. One never knows."

Good old Anwar. He knew it was the flashlight that had gotten us out of our jam. He knew our situation was hopeless as well as I did. But why not humor him? He had been so good to us. And after all, we would have nothing to look forward to but working in the bakery and eating onions for the rest of our lives. I swallowed hard. We might as well try. We followed Anwar into

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

the pyramid.

What had been so frightening the first time wasn't so scary now. We made our way down the stairs. The emerald had already been replaced on the queen's statue. Was she smiling down on us? Was it my imagination or just wishful thinking? I didn't know. I didn't know anything anymore.

"So now what do we do?" asked Jack. "Close our eyes and make a wish?"

Anwar missed Jack's sarcasm. "That's a very good idea. It will help us contact the queen's spirit. Think very hard about Pennsylvania so she will know what it is you want."

I was sure thinking a lot about Pennsylvania. If that was all we needed to get us home, we were practically there. Because I was absolutely certain that Mollie and Jack were thinking exactly the same thing.

That's why it was such a disappointment to open our eyes after a few minutes, to find that nothing had changed. We were still sitting on the floor at the foot of the statue in the cold, dark pyramid. I had to choke back my tears.

Rags hadn't been sitting still though. He'd been wandering around the chamber where we

FRIGHT TIME

had dropped the treasure that night. He probably hadn't been thinking of Pennsylvania at all. Traitor! You're the reason all this happened in the first place. I guess he couldn't read my thoughts because he came over to me and nuzzled against my knee.

"Okay, I forgive you. After all, you're only a dog." I patted his head and ruffled the fur around his collar. "Hey, what's this? Rags, this isn't your collar."

I bent over to get a better look. The collar looked like a bracelet of all different color gem stones. The stones had inscriptions carved on them. I rubbed them to see if I could make out the designs.

That's when we felt it. The air began moving. Like it was throbbing, sort of. The room wasn't moving, only the air. Slowly. Then stronger and stronger. Suddenly, I was being lifted off the ground, an inch at a time. So were Mollie and Jack. We floated upward. Only Anwar remained on the stone floor.

He smiled sadly. "She has heard you. You are going home. I am happy for you but sad for me."

Mollie put out her hand to him. But she was already out of reach. "Oh Anwar, we will

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

miss you so much. Remember us. Please remember us."

"Hey Anwar, now you know the way to Pennsylvania, come see us," Jack called.

"No. I am meant to stay here," Anwar said quietly, looking up at us. "That is why she is not letting me go with you now. But we will meet in the spirit world someday."

I was too choked up to say anything. Except for Jack, Anwar had been my closest friend. We had been through so much together. And now there was only a moment to tell him that. The pulsating was getting stronger and stronger. It was lifting us to the ceiling and beyond. I could feel we were ready to lift off.

"Good-bye, Anwar. Here!" I called.

I threw him my flashlight.

12

We were going faster and faster as we went higher. Anwar looked smaller and smaller. Soon we couldn't see him at all. I never thought I would be sad to leave Egypt, but I was going to miss Anwar. I knew he would be all right. Ra-

FRIGHT TIME

hotep would see to that. He looked at Anwar, and all of us, as heroes. Maybe someday Anwar would be an official himself. But the sad thing was, we would never see him again. We'd never know what happened to him.

All around us, we could feel the air pulsating. It was kind of neat and cozy. Like a cocoon, I guess, if you're an insect. We didn't have to do a thing but just relax and ride. Mollie floated past me with Rags in her arms. Jack was just below me, his long arms and legs flapping around like he had no bones. He reminded me of an old marionette doll Mollie used to play with.

I kept thinking about all our adventures in Egypt—the day we met Anwar, the barge rides up the Nile, Hosi, and the bakery, seeing the pharaoh, even if it was only for a moment.

Then, just like when we first fell, things changed. I could hear the whirring sounds again. I don't know if you'd call it music exactly. Only this time it wasn't dark. We were surrounded by lights of all different colors. Like the music, you couldn't tell where the light was coming from, it was just there. It was like floating on a million rainbows.

I stopped thinking of anything and just drifted.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

It was great and it seemed to go on forever.

Then with a final whoosh, straight up, back through complete blackness, we landed on the ledge. The same ledge Jack fell off. Was it days ago, or centuries ago? Who knew?

Rags, who had been so good, became his old crazy self, barking and scratching to get out of this black hole. Anyone would think there was a ball out there just waiting for him.

Now this was very tricky. I remembered how I got sucked into the hole before. We had to be very careful not to fall back in.

"Jack, you're bigger than I am. See if you can lift me up high enough to reach the edge. Then maybe I can move our pyramid. That thing can't be as heavy as we thought. Mollie, move over to one side so we don't push you accidentally."

After a couple of tries and scratching my arms, I managed to get hold of the edge with one hand. With the other hand, I was able to nudge the pyramid. It lifted up like a kite in a strong wind.

I climbed out first. Then Jack lifted Mollie so I could pull her and Rags out. Then Mollie and I pulled Jack up. It was so easy this time.

The three of us sat there on the grass while

FRIGHT TIME

Rags chased his ball around the yard. For the longest time nobody said anything. We just sat and stared at our pyramid. Then Jack broke the silence. "We didn't get the canvas very tight on this side. Maybe we'd better fix it. And how about Mollie's hieroglyphs? She didn't paint over them yet. Why don't we just leave them? I kind of like them."

"Me, too."

"See, I told you. Queens are cool," said Mollie, smugly.

Mom's van pulled into the driveway. "Hey guys, give me a hand here." She started loading us up with grocery bags.

"Your pyramid looks great. It didn't take you long to finish it. Daddy will help you move it to the school when he gets home. Here Rags, here's a treat for you for staying home all day like a good dog."

We dumped the bags on the kitchen counter and went back outside. Mom came with us. "You know you have to be careful of pyramids," she continued. "People say they have magic powers. You can get lost in them." She gave us her wicked smile to let us know she was only teasing.

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

"Yeah, well I don't believe in that stuff. But we did have one problem. We fell through..." But before I could tell her about the hole, the phone rang inside the house.

"Hold the thought, Mike. I'll be right back."

"Maybe we should move the pyramid onto solid ground so you can show your mom the hole. It is kind of hard to believe if you don't see it," Jack said.

"Be careful," warned Mollie. "I don't know how far we fell but it's a wonder we weren't all killed. And you know what's so weird? I don't even have a bruise."

I thought about that. Neither did I. I didn't even hurt.

"Jack, you grab that corner and I'll take this corner and we'll drag it. Watch out for the sundial and the tulips. And whatever you do, don't slip back into the hole!"

Man, were we careful. Anybody would have thought we were the bomb squad and the pyramid was ready to explode. We dragged the pyramid as far as we could toward the driveway. Then we looked back.

There was no hole. And no evidence that there ever had been a hole. It was just the same old,

FRIGHT TIME

clumpy lawn I mowed every summer.

The three of us looked at each other in bewilderment.

My dad drove into the yard just then in his truck. I was glad for the interruption. It's no fun to think you might be going crazy.

"So this is what we're going to haul, is it? That doesn't look like much of a job. A little grunt work is all." He walked around and inspected our work. "Very nice. It passes inspection. Look, I was going to cart it over to school after dinner, but it's getting dark and you're all here now, so why not get it over with? Mollie, you run in and get my flashlight. We might need it over at the school. You boys grab a corner and we'll hoist this thing up on the truck."

It was clumsy, but Jack and I got it in and climbed in back, holding on to it. Dad got in the driver's seat and we waited for Mollie to come back with the flashlight. The sun had gone down now and I was getting cold.

"Come on, Mollie. How long does it take to get the flashlight out of Dad's tool chest?" I muttered.

The screen door slammed and Mollie came over to the truck, empty-handed. "Daddy, I

KEEPER OF THE TOMBS

looked everywhere and I can't find the flashlight."

"Oh, for the love of Pete. Mike, did you take the flashlight again?"

The three of us looked at each other. Anwar. Anwar had Dad's flashlight. The hole we fell through might be gone, but we had gone down it. Everything had happened for real. The missing flashlight proved it.

I looked at my dad and shrugged, holding out my empty hands. "Sorry, Dad," I said. "I guess I must have left it someplace."

Somplace far, far away.

And very long ago.

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